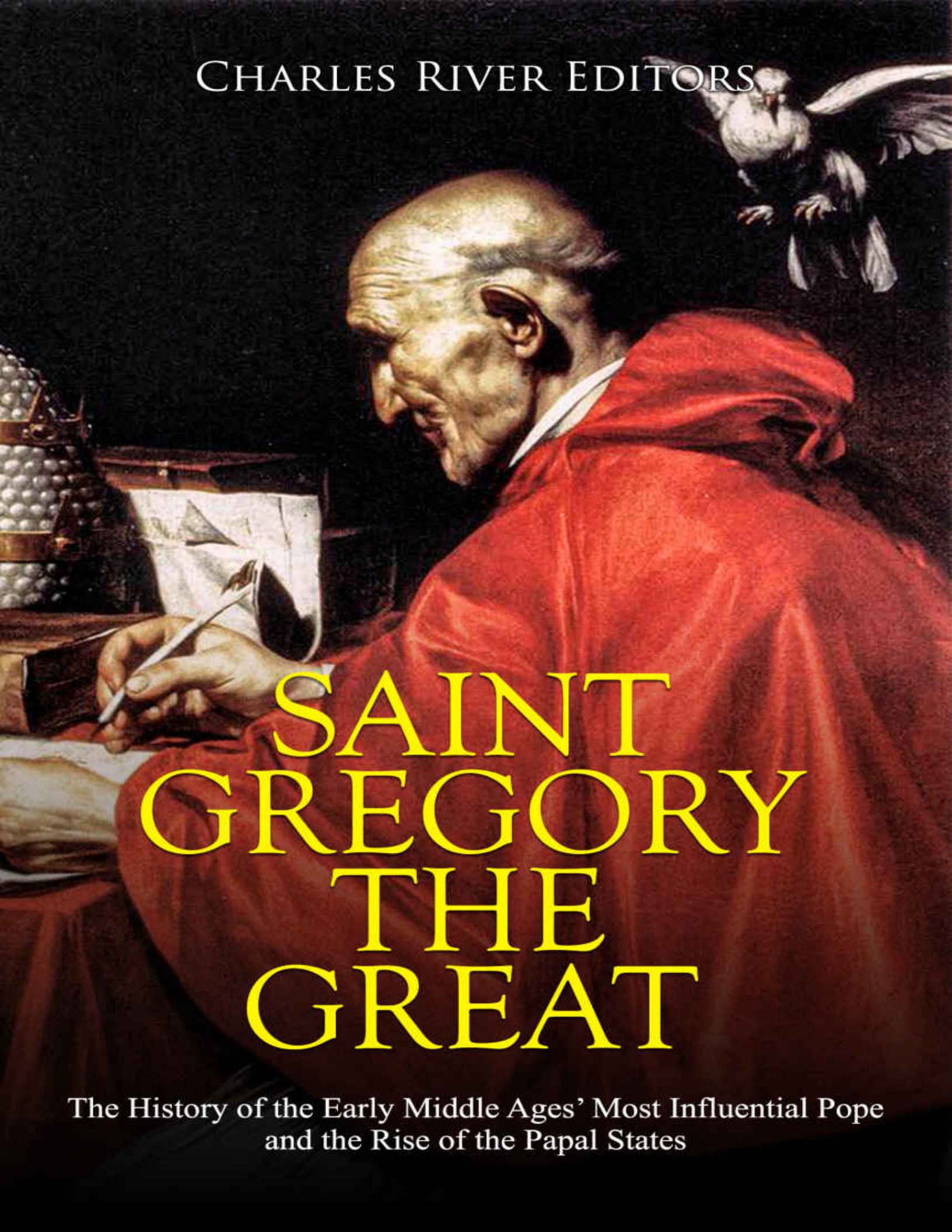
CHARLES RIVER EDITORS
SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT
The History of the Early Middle Ages' Most Influential Pope and the Rise of the Papal States

Saint Gregory the Great: The History of the Early Middle Ages' Most Influential Pope and the Rise of the Papal States

By Charles River Editors

A modern illustration depicting Gregory the Great

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Introduction

A medieval image depicting one of Gregory's letters to the bishop of Seville

"No one does more harm in the Church than he who has the title or rank of holiness and acts perversely."-St. Gregory the Great

The pope, the bishop of Rome, claims spiritual authority over more than a billion Catholics worldwide. He also exercises temporal authority over a tiny enclave of Rome consisting of the Vatican Palace, Saint Peter's Basilica, and

44 hectares with the ancient Leonine Walls. As Sovereign of the Vatican City States, he has around 1,000 subjects, mostly clerics.

While those facts are widely known, many are not familiar with the fact that before the reunification of Italy in the late 19th century, the popes were rulers not only of the city of Rome but of much of central Italy for over a thousand years. The Papal States, as they are usually referred to, were formally gifted to the Church by the Frankish King Pepin III (r.751-768) in 756, but the origins of the Papal States can be traced back over 150 years earlier. One of the most prominent figures in the foundation of the Papal States was Pope Gregory I, who led the Roman Church and the city of Rome from 590-604. During his time, Rome enjoyed the prominence in Italy it once had before being sacked in the late 5th century, and Pope Gregory I helped ensure that the Eternal City would shape the destiny of Western Europe, not the Byzantine capital of Constantinople.

In the wake of the Western Roman Empire's collapse, kings across Western Europe continued to maintain the appearance of imperial unity and claimed the status of lawful subjects of the Eastern Roman Empire, then based out of Constantinople. Thus, the Germanic kings adorned themselves with the ceremonial regalia of the Roman court, adopted the religion of the emperor, and continued to govern as the emperors had done. For example, the leader of the Franks ruled Gaul as *Rex Romanorum* ("King of the Romans"), and even Odoacer, who had dared to depose the last Western Roman emperor, ruled by the grace of Emperor Zeno (r. 474-491) in Constantinople. Indeed, it has been argued that for the great majority of Romans in the West, nothing really changed,[1] as they continued to be governed by Roman law, to observe their customs and to practice their religion. The governing classes had been supplanted, but they were generally content to govern their subjects as their imperial predecessors had done. From this point of view, the empire in the West had not really fallen.

Thus, in the early 6th century, a kind of stability had taken root in the West. Gaul was ruled by the Franks, Spain by the Visigoths, and Italy by the Ostrogoths. In Italy, the people maintained their ties with the emperor in Constantinople, now viewed as the new Rome, and the Byzantine Empire was wealthy, strong, and confident. Although the Germanic kingdoms deferred to Constantinople in name only, they did not wish to destroy Roman

civilization, and while this new order was not perfect as far as Constantinople was concerned, it at least offered stability.

This would all change during the late 6th century, and in the middle of it all was the papacy. Under the leadership of Gregory I, the political and religious tumult of the era would help give rise to modern Europe. *Saint Gregory the Great: The History of the Early Middle Ages' Most Influential Pope and the Rise of the Papal States* examines how Gregory I led the Church, and the way his time in power permanently impacted the world. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Gregory the Great like never before.

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Christianity and the Collapse of the Western Roman Empire

The growth of Christianity is irrevocably linked with the legacy of the Roman Empire, in particular the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great. Not much is known about the early years of Constantine's life, or his upbringing. As the son of a family who at least on his father's side possessed a significant degree of wealth and social standing, he was presumably educated in the traditional fashion of the Roman aristocracy, with tutors lecturing him in history, philosophy and the sciences. He was likely also taught music, riding, and the arts of war: combat, strategy and tactics.

An ancient bust of Constantine now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City

In 284 CE, when Constantine would have been around 12 years old, the Emperor Diocletian made Constantius governor of Dalmatia, a signal honor which meant a vast increase in the family's wealth and influence. The

following year, Diocletian made the momentous decision to appoint the prominent general Maximian as his co-emperor, effectively starting the great schism which would eventually see the two halves of the empire become two completely separate entities. Diocletian took the East and established himself in Nicomedia (modern Turkey) as his new capital, while Maximian ruled the West from Mediolanum (Milan). Although the separation was made for purely practical administrative reasons and the Empire was continuously described as indivisible, the seeds of separation had been sown. Constantius, however, was one of the men who benefitted most from Diocletian's decision due to being an intimate associate of Maximian. Three years after the split, he was raised to the newly created post of praetorian prefect, a sort of subordinate emperor who could act with Maximian's authority.

Bust of Diocletian

Bust of Maximian

Constantius prospered under the new regime by assuming control of the rich province of Gaul, and to strengthen his ties with Maximian he cast Helena aside and married Maximian's stepdaughter Theodora. Constantine, who was deeply attached to his mother, was in all likelihood furious, but there was nothing he could do; the political advantages of a marriage to Theodora were undeniable. In 293 CE, Constantius packed both Helena and Constantine and sent them off to Diocletian's court in Nicomedia, possibly so he could enjoy his newly wedded bliss but also for another, more pragmatic reason. Diocletian had divided the empire still further, splitting the two parts into two further units and granting two Caesars, newly created "sub-emperors," absolute power over the two units respectively, though they would still be subordinated to Diocletian and Maximian. These two Caesars were Constantius and Galerius, a man who had an unsavory reputation for being a brute. Thus, Constantine would be a hostage for his father's good behavior at Diocletian's court.

Bust of Galerius

In the wake of a prophecy from the vastly influential oracle at Delphi, Diocletian began what became known as the "Great Persecution" of the Christians. The Christians, whose worship excluded the divinity of other gods (unlike the polytheist pagans, who might consider other gods inferior but never denied their very existence), made a convenient scapegoat, and their church in Nicomedia was torn down. At the same time, known Christians were deprived of their public offices, and Christian clerics were arrested. Constantine later professed deep disgust at Diocletian's actions and attempted to distance himself from them, but he seems to have been ambivalent to them at the time. He was a prominent figure at court, and although he was in many ways a hostage and thus could not challenge Diocletian, he was obviously in the Emperor's good graces at the time since he secured a promotion to *tribunus ordini primi* (tribune of the first order) in 305.

The same year Constantine obtained his promotion, Diocletian fell ill, and he decided to step down as Emperor rather than be driven to his deathbed by the cares of the state. However, rather than favor Constantine and Maximian's son Maxentius in the succession, as everybody expected, Diocletian was manipulated by Galerius into choosing Constantius and himself as the two new Emperors. An able but uninspiring general named Severus was chosen as Caesar of the West, while Maximinus, the son of

Galerius's half-sister, was chosen as Galerius's Caesar. Constantine and Maxentius were snubbed.

Maxentius

Constantine soon realized that staying at court was not only likely to get him passed over for further promotion but might also cost him his life. Galerius heaped ever more dangerous and demanding tasks upon him, including combat with wild beasts and detached reconnaissance behind enemy lines, clearly aimed at getting him killed and disposing of a rival. In the end, Constantine decided he would be safest with his father, so he requested permission to join him. He connived to get Galerius obscenely drunk while he considered the proposal, and once he secured his acquiescence he fled the city with only a small escort, half-killing a string of horses in the process, to put as much distance between himself and Galerius

before the latter sobered up sufficiently to regret his decision. He joined his father at his armed camp in Bononia (Boulogne) shortly afterwards.

From Bononia, Constantius and Constantine sailed to Britannia and marched northwards to Eboracum (York), which held the largest garrison in Northern Britain. At the head of the Eboracum troops, Constantius and Constantine campaigned jointly north of Hadrian's Wall against the Picts but met with little success as the Picts fell back northwards, using unconventional guerrilla warfare tactics and refusing to be drawn into pitched battle. Eventually the army marched back to Eboracum without having achieved much, other than to worsen an illness that had afflicted Constantius for years. He died at Eboracum in the summer of 306, after having asserted his support for Constantine's claim to take the title of Augustus in his stead and become Galerius's co-Emperor. Chrocus, King of the Alamanni and commander of Constantius's auxiliaries, confirmed Constantius's appointment, as did the legions that had owed fealty to Constantius. Constantine sent a message proclaiming his new status to Galerius, who fell into a rage and denied any such appointment, instead proclaiming Severus as Augustus and declaring that Constantine would have to make do with the rank of Caesar. In order to avoid civil war, Constantine had to grudgingly accept.

Despite the support of the legions of Gaul, Britain and Iberia, Constantine knew his new position was far from secure, so he quickly set about repairing the infrastructure of his new domains, expanding military bases and supply depots and resurfacing the crucial roads between them to guarantee rapid troop movement. He then returned to Augusta Treverorum, the western Caesar's capital (in modern Trier, France), just in time to repel an invasion of the Franks under their kings Meirogasus and Ascaric.

The Franks had hoped to profit from Constantius's death by taking the untried Constantine unawares, but they found him more than ready. Not only did he drive their forces back over the Rhine, he also captured Meirogasus and Ascaric and fed them to wild beasts in Augusta Treverorum's amphitheater, along with other prisoners of war (which it should be noted does not suggest a particularly Christian sensibility). However, Constantine, though not especially adept at aping Christian morals, was far more skilled at currying favor with them. While Galerius was engaged in a series of ruthless

persecutions against the Christians in his portion of the Roman Empire, Constantine, in order to prove how much more enlightened he was than his rival, extended a policy of tolerance and reconciliation towards all Christians within his portion of the Western Roman Empire. He accomplished this by reinstating lands and titles that had been lost during the great persecution, as well as preaching religious tolerance. He also undertook a major renovation and expansion of Augusta Treverorum, increasing its fortifications and beginning work on a palatial complex within the walls. Other cities throughout Gaul also benefited from his renovations projects, which boosted the economy within his borders.

If things were improving within Constantine's domains, however, trouble was stirring beyond his borders. Maxentius, who had taken up residence in Rome and was building a powerful army of his supporters there, received the news of Constantine's appointment as Caesar by declaring him the illegitimate offspring of a foreign whore and refusing to acknowledge his title's legitimacy, thereby proclaiming himself Emperor.

Maxentius was not the only one who believed he would win a civil war, for it was widely believed within Constantine's own inner circle that an attack on Maxentius would fail. The omens, which were notoriously fickle (unless manipulated by a skilled politician), suggested a gloomy outlook, but Constantine ignored all such dire warnings and remained determined to attack.

In the first months of 312, when campaigning season resumed, Constantine took an expeditionary force of 40,000 men through the high passes and into the Alps. He then marched on Segusium (Susa, Italy), the first of a series of vital fortresses manned by Maxentian troops along his line of march. Despite formidable defenses and the refusal of the garrison to come to terms, Constantine's troops made short work of the fortress, burning the gates down and storming the walls. Constantine, however, kept his men rigidly in check and spared the inhabitants of Segusium the horrors that traditionally followed a siege, a calculated move that helped his reputation skyrocket throughout northern Italy.

Eventually, Maxentius realized he had no choice but to offer battle, and after constructing a bridge of boats across the Tiber, in October of 312

Maxentius marched his army over the river to face Constantine in open battle. Despite the attrition of the year's campaigns and widespread desertion, Maxentius could still field double the number of troops that Constantine possessed, but if myth and Constantine's later propaganda can be believed, Constantine possessed an invincible ally: God.

According to both Eusebius and Lactantius, two of the Emperor's principal biographers, the day before the battle Constantine was stricken by a vision. Lactantius claims that Constantine was visited by an angel as he dreamt the night before battle, while Eusebius's version is even more theatrical. According to Eusebius, while Constantine's army was on the march, a fiery symbol, shaped like the crossed X and P of the Latin Alphabet (☧) and bearing beneath it the legend "*Ev Τούτῳ Νίκα*" ("by this sign, you will conquer"), appeared in the sky above. The X and P represented the Greek letters Xhi and Rho, the first two letters of Christ's name in the Greek spelling.

Presumably, such a divine manifestation would have prompted an on-the-spot conversion, and Constantine certainly alluded to that in later propaganda, but there is significant evidence that the original manifestation was actually viewed as a pagan divine revelation. In that version, the revelation was interpreted as being the halo of *Sol Invictus,* the Sun God with whom Constantine claimed a long-standing association and whose iconography was depicted in coins issued by Constantine even years after the battle.

This gold coin, minted in 313, depicts Constantine with *Sol Invictus*

One problem with the theory that Constantine merely observed what he thought was a divine revelation from *Sol Invictus* is that accounts agree he changed the appearance of his equipment before the battle. Some scholars have rather optimistically suggested that the fiery symbol was in fact a sun dog, but whatever the source of Constantine's divine inspiration, whether miraculous, scientific or simply clever propaganda, on the day of battle his armies apparently approached Maxentius's forces with the Xhi Rho painted on their shields. According to Eusebius: "Assuming therefore the Supreme God as his patron, and invoking His Christ to be his preserver and aid, and setting the victorious trophy, the salutary symbol, in front of his soldiers and body-guard, he marched with his whole forces, trying to obtain again for the Romans the freedom they had inherited from their ancestors."

After he won the decisive battle, Constantine entered Rome the following day in a formal victory parade which was apparently met by throngs of people in genuine jubilation. Maxentius's body had been found and pulled out of the river the day before, and his head was paraded at the front of Constantine's victory column. Interestingly, Constantine declined to make

the traditional victory offerings at the Temple of Jupiter, but this may not necessarily be proof of his Christian conversion so much as it might either reflect his continuing attachment to *Sol Invictus* or his awareness that such a gesture would alienate Rome's Christians. Constantine then subjected Maxentius to a *damnatio memoriae*, as he had done to Maximian, before shipping his head off to northern Africa to signify his new status as ruler of all the territories Maxentius had previously held sway over. Although he appropriated all public works undertaken by Maxentius and repealed all his previous edicts and tax increases, a measure which endeared him no end to the common people, Constantine carried out no purges or persecutions of Maxentius's erstwhile supporters.

Having consolidated his position within his own domains, Constantine then set about securing his borders from invasion. Matters outside the Western Roman Empire were still on a knife's edge with Maximin and Licinius at each other's throats, and so to smooth matters over Constantine suggested that he and Licinius meet in Mediolanum and talk peace. Accordingly, the two Emperors met in the city in 313, with Constantine asking that Licinius make good on his previous promise to marry his sister Constantia.

However, the most famous and significant result of the encounter was not the renewal of their alliance but their joint edict, later dubbed the Edict of Milan, on religious freedom. The Edict of Milan was not quite the landmark that Christian scholars declared it to be, given that Galerius had issued a similar edict shortly before his death. In Galerius's edict in 311, Christians who "followed such a caprice and had fallen into such a folly that they would not obey the institutes of antiquity" were excused from their "errors": "Wherefore, for this our indulgence, they ought to pray to their God for our safety, for that of the republic, and for their own, that the commonwealth may continue uninjured on every side, and that they may be able to live securely in their homes."

With that said, the Edict of Milan certainly went further than Galerius did, by declaring all religions exempt from persecution and proclaiming freedom of worship for all, with a special emphasis on Christianity. Not only were Christians freed from any persecution and allowed to worship in peace, but their property (including entire churches) and wealth that had previously

been seized in various religious purges over the years were granted to them with full restitution. The Edict stated:

> "When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I, Licinius Augustus, fortunately met near Mediolanurn (Milan), and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule. And thus by this wholesome counsel and most upright provision we thought to arrange that no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion, of that religion which he should think best for himself, so that the Supreme Deity, to whose worship we freely yield our hearts) may show in all things His usual favor and benevolence. Therefore, your Worship should know that it has pleased us to remove all conditions whatsoever, which were in the rescripts formerly given to you officially, concerning the Christians and now any one of these who wishes to observe Christian religion may do so freely and openly, without molestation. We thought it fit to commend these things most fully to your care that you may know that we have given to those Christians free and unrestricted opportunity of religious worship. When you see that this has been granted to them by us, your Worship will know that we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as he pleases; this regulation is made we that we may not seem to detract from any dignity or any religion.
>
> "Moreover, in the case of the Christians especially we esteemed it best to order that if it happens anyone heretofore has bought from our treasury from anyone whatsoever, those places where they were previously accustomed to assemble, concerning which a

certain decree had been made and a letter sent to you officially, the same shall be restored to the Christians without payment or any claim of recompense and without any kind of fraud or deception, Those, moreover, who have obtained the same by gift, are likewise to return them at once to the Christians. Besides, both those who have purchased and those who have secured them by gift, are to appeal to the vicar if they seek any recompense from our bounty, that they may be cared for through our clemency. All this property ought to be delivered at once to the community of the Christians through your intercession, and without delay. And since these Christians are known to have possessed not only those places in which they were accustomed to assemble, but also other property, namely the Churches, belonging to them as a corporation and not as individuals, all these things which we have included under the above law, you will order to be restored, without any hesitation or controversy at all, to these Christians, that is to say to the corporations and their conventicles: providing, of course, that the above arrangements be followed so that those who return the same without payment, as we have said, may hope for an indemnity from our bounty. In all these circumstances you ought to tender your most efficacious intervention to the community of the Christians, that our command may be carried into effect as quickly as possible, whereby, moreover, through our clemency, public order may be secured. Let this be done so that, as we have said above, Divine favor towards us, which, under the most important circumstances we have already experienced, may, for all time, preserve and prosper our successes together with the good of the state. Moreover, in order that the statement of this decree of our good will may come to the notice of all, this rescript, published by your decree, shall be announced everywhere and brought to the knowledge of all, so that the decree of this, our benevolence, cannot be concealed."

Nevertheless, despite this favoritism towards Christianity, there is still no definitive proof that Constantine was a Christian at this stage. Indeed, two years later, when he erected the famous Arch of Constantine, he made

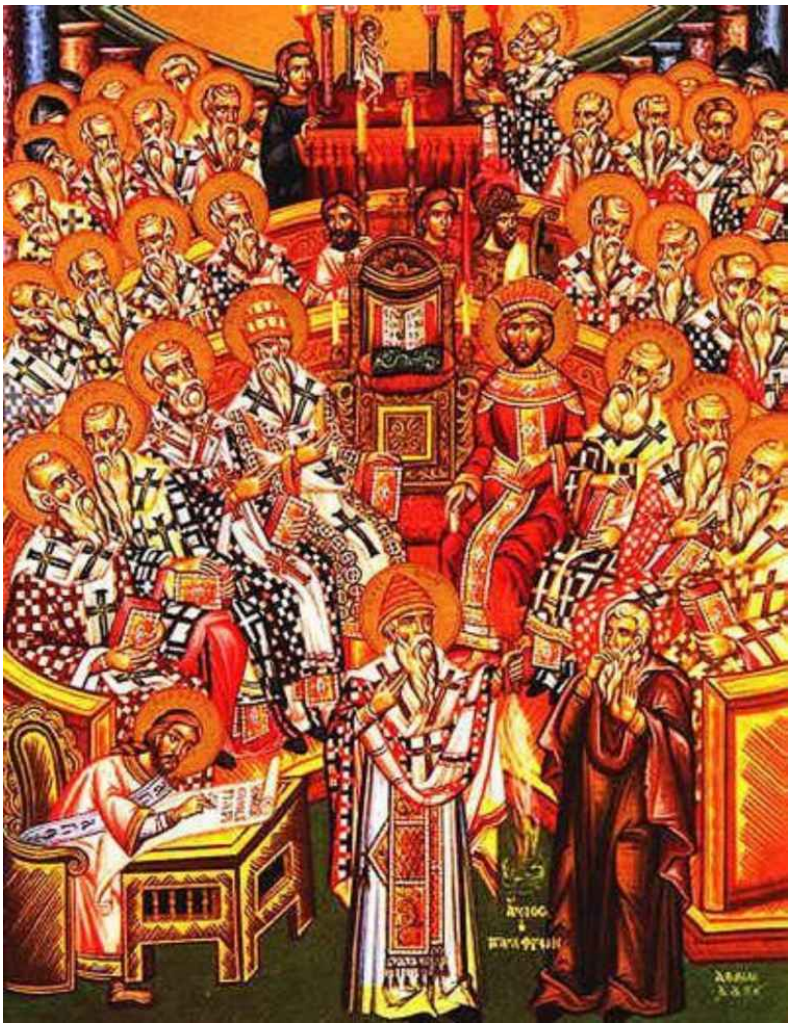
sacrifices to Victory and other deities. Though there are religious motifs on the arch itself, as well as religious themes affecting the way it was constructed and located, they are all pagan, and there is no Christian iconography to be found anywhere on the arch.

The arch

In 325 CE, Constantine presided over the first Ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea. In his role as *Pontifex Maximus* (supreme pontiff), a role that the Emperors had held since Augustus but now included Christian clerics as well, Constantine presided over the declaration of Arianism as heretical, as well as declaring the Roman Julian Calendar the only valid source for ecclesiastical festivities (as opposed to the more traditional Hebrew calendar). Interestingly, despite this close involvement in Christian affairs, Constantine was still contentedly minting currency representing *Sol Invictus*, with the Labacum being retained as his personal standard, not as an imperial standard.

Thus, it is still technically unclear whether Constantine was avowedly a Christian at this point, but he certainly seemed to have been making an overt

show of portraying himself as such. Still, even as he was constructing churches such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the original Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, he was taking care to ingratiate himself with the pagans by maintaining their shrines, guaranteeing religious freedom, and constructing temples throughout the empire.



Orthodox icon depicting the First Council of Nicaea

It was around 326 that the shadowy figure of Helena, Constantine's mother, reemerged to the fore, this time as the architect of Constantine's policy of religious integration and promotion of Christian rights. In 327, Helena, who was almost certainly a devout Christian with Constantine's blessing, traveled to Jerusalem on a quest to uncover some of Christianity's most sacred relics. With the title of Augusta Imperatrix and the virtually limitless funds of Constantine's royal treasury at her complete disposal,

Helena traveled to the Holy Land, where she passed through Bethlehem and established the Church of the Nativity (on the location of Christ's birthplace at Bethlehem) and the Church of the Mount of Olives (on the site of Christ's ascension). According to local tradition, Helena also founded a church and attendant monastery on the site of the Burning Bush before proceeding for Jerusalem.

Icon depicting Constantine and Helena

Once she had reached the holy city, Helena proceeded to the pagan temple that Hadrian had ordered built over the site of Jesus's tomb (near Calvary) and had it torn down, intending to build a church in its place. While the

workers were excavating the foundations, they discovered the remnants of three large crosses, which Helena declared to be the True Cross on which Jesus was crucified and the two crosses the two thieves were martyred on. According to legend, the True Cross confirmed its authenticity by curing a terminally ill woman and was promptly taken into safekeeping by Helena herself. Helena is also credited with discovering Jesus's tunic, pieces of rope used to tie Jesus to the cross, nails from the crucifixion, and other relics, many of which would eventually find their way to Rome. Others were left in Jerusalem, and still more eventually were placed in Cyprus. Helena also brought back earth from Golgotha, which was scattered over the site of the Vatican Gardens.

While Constantine's mother was touring the Holy Land in search of religious artifacts and causing his own credit with his Christian subjects to skyrocket in the process, Constantine had not been idle. At this stage, he believed his new, unified empire needed a capital. His old stronghold of Augusta Trierorum was neither grand enough nor sufficiently positioned strategically, and other cities like Sirmium and Rome itself all presented problems.

Constantine decided, in the end, to redevelop the strategically vital city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus. Accordingly, he began an unprecedentedly vast program of reconstruction and expansion which was initially named *Nova Roma Constantiniana* ("the new Rome of Constantine"). In a departure from his previously theologically ambivalent religious policies, Constantine chose to erect only Christian temples in his new city, even replacing some older pagan structures, and placed relics in "religiously strategic" places throughout the city to extend divine protection over the walls of what quickly became known colloquially as Constantinople.

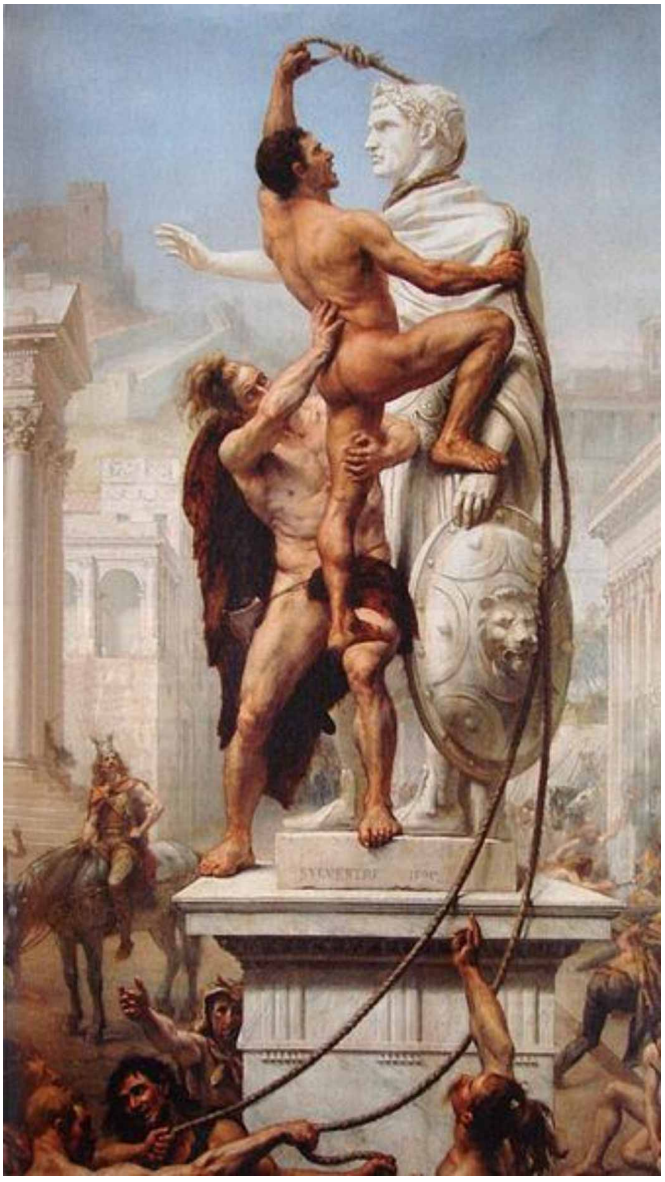
Hagia Eirene, the first church commissioned by Constantine in Constantinople

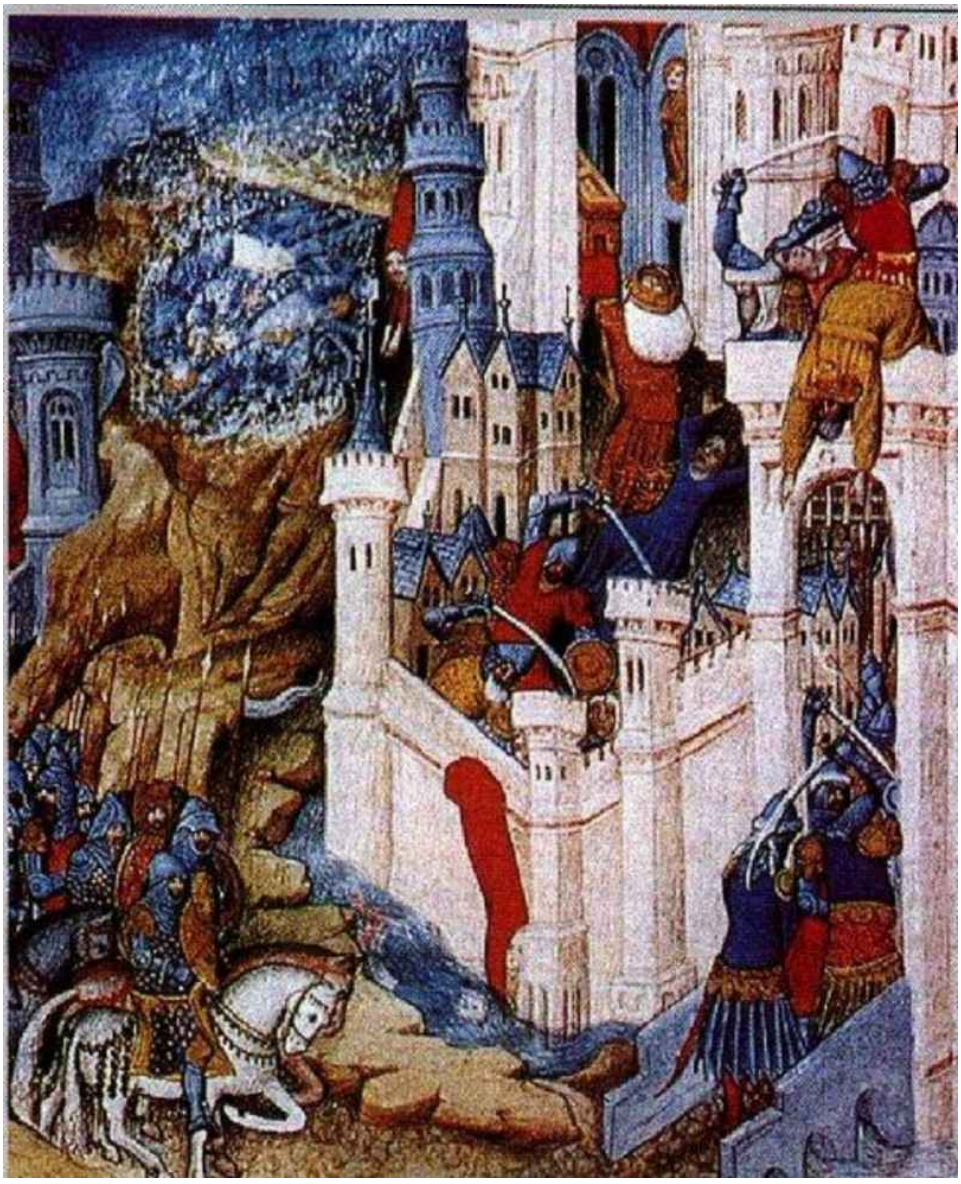
Constantine revived the clean shaven look, which Augustus himself had favored 300 years earlier. Given his conversion of the empire and relocation to Constantinople, Constantine directly shaped the histories of Europe, the Byzantine Empire, the Roman Empire, and the growth of the Catholic Church. While he was being venerated as a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Byzantine Empire, Charlemagne was claiming his mantle in Western Europe about 400 years later, making sure that his own court was adorned with monuments to Constantine. Constantine's popularity even extended to Britain, where 12th century Britons were trying to claim him as a native son by claiming Helena actually originated from Colchester.

At the same time, Constantine was shaped by his times just as much as he shaped them. His decision to regard Rome an unsalvageable capital was the

consequence of a deeply rooted pragmatism. After all, Constantine himself had conquered Rome, and in less than 100 years, Rome would be sacked by foreigners.

By 408, Alaric I and the Visigoths were laying siege to the Eternal City, though it was no longer technically the capital of the Western Roman Empire. The Romans had moved their capital to the more easily defended city of Ravenna, but Emperor Honorius still hoped to deal with Alaric's Visigoths in Italy. Meanwhile, the Senate took matters into its own hand by bribing Alaric with 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, and other goods to end the siege. Alaric took the deal and left the region, but before the Senate could convince Honorius to figure out a way to placate the Goths, Alaric was back to lay siege to Rome yet again, in part because Honorius initially tried to use military means to force the Goths out.





Medieval depictions of Alaric's sack of Rome

Somewhat fittingly, the ultimate collapse of Rome benefited the Eastern Roman Empire. Having been cut off from the Western half of the empire, the Byzantines in Constantinople made Theodoric, the leader of the Ostrogoths, the imperial Master of Soldiers and even a patrician in 484, titles accompanied with financial subsidies. Nonetheless, he and his armies still wreaked havoc on the Balkan provinces and all major urban centers there. Since Odoacer ruled the West, Zeno hoped to neutralize the two barbarian obstacles by promising Italy to Theodoric if he removed Odoacer from the throne of the Western Empire. Thus, Theodoric was given the task to restore

Byzantine control and rule in the name of the Byzantine Emperor, and he left for Italy with 100,000 followers.

The removal of the Ostrogoths from the Balkans obliterated the military threat they became for the integrity of the Eastern Roman Empire, but in the long run, it caused more problems than solutions for the Byzantine Emperors. Instead of getting an obedient vassal, Zeno was faced with Theodoric founding his own Italian kingdom with a capital in Ravenna after he arrived in Italy late in the summer of 489 and conquered all the lands ruled by Odoacer in three great battles. Ravenna, Casana, and Rimini were the only strongholds that did not fall to Theodoric in 490, so Odoacer resisted for three more years, but a great famine in the besieged cities was the breaking point of Odoacer's power. He was executed a short period after surrendering Ravenna to Theodoric.

Though Theodoric and his people were a politically driving force in Italy, a deep cultural chasm developed between the Goth newcomers and the Roman natives. The groups had different languages, different customs, and different social orders, and the language difference also spilled over into literacy and religion. The majority of the Goths were followers of Arianism, introduced to Christianity by the teaching of Ulfilas (also spelled as Wulfilas), a 4th century bishop who was also Goth by origin. Ulfilas had spread Arian teachings to his followers and translated the Bible into the Goths' language. [2] The oldest surviving copy of Ulfilas' translation of the Bible is the 6th century purple *Codex Argenteus* or the *Silver Book*, which contains almost all of the text of the four Gospels.[3]

All of this would help motivate the Byzantine emperors back in Constantinople to make another play for Rome, but the regional differences already existed, and they would have a lasting impact on the Church. In fact, even as the division of the Roman Empire only formally occurred in 395 by the judgment of Theodosius I (347-395), by then the authority of the Church had already spread across the Mediterranean Sea.

Five Christian Sees arose throughout the empire. These were known as the Pentarchy, and their patriarchs were the Bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. Each was presumed to have been founded by an apostle, but their preeminence over other bishoprics was

mostly due to the economic and administrative power these cities had[4]. The Sees of Rome and Antioch were said to have been founded by Saint Peter himself, considered the most important figure in the foundation of the Church after Jesus and also the first Supreme Pontiff. Constantinople's See had Andrew the Apostle, brother of Peter, as its founder.

The Rise of the Papacy

In the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church the first bishop of Rome was the Apostle Peter in the 1st century. The claim has been disputed, though early authorities attest to the apostle's presence in the city and in 1960 bones discovered beneath Saint Peter's Basilica were identified as belonging to a male of about 61 years who died in the 1st century.[5] Regardless, the bishops of Rome have always claimed a line of succession from Peter and a position of preeminence amongst their fellow bishops. The Council of Ephesus in 431 declared, "There is no doubt, and in fact it has been known in all ages, that the holy and most blessed Peter, prince and head of the Apostles, pillar of the faith and foundation of the Catholic Church, received the Keys of the Kingdom from our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of the human race, and to him was given the power of loosing and binding sins; who down even to this day and forever both lives and judges in his successors. The holy and most blessed Pope Celestine [the pope at the time], according to due order, is his successor and holds his place."[6]

When Emperor Constantine I adopted Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century, it was natural enough that the Roman bishop should assume a position of considerable importance in civil affairs. The Roman Church was endowed with numerous properties and even the Lateran Palace, and the Vatican would constantly cite the *Donation of Constantine* as giving it incredible powers. This document, purportedly sent in the 4th century to Pope Sylvester by Emperor Constantine, conferred on Rome's Church the right to crown monarchs, something that had previously been the sole right of Roman emperors.

Lateran Square

During his lifetime, Constantine had authorized Christianity as the formal religion of the empire, and though he had not created a single and united Christianity, his authority as supreme patriarch was observed by all churches and he, "for his services to the Church, was raised to the rank of Equal to the Apostles."[7] In this context, the *Donation* was immensely important in the early growth of the Church because under its provisions, the pope, holding the authority of Constantine, was not only above the other patriarchs of the Church but also above any king. This notion of the temporal power of the papacy would ensure its active participation in matters outside the normal ecclesiastical sphere.

When the Roman Empire split and Rome collapsed, the *Donation* suggested that the pope was not under the rule of the Byzantine emperor, unlike the Eastern Church patriarchs. Although they "were nominally elected by their bishops, it was the Emperor, in fact, who appointed them and deposed them, more or less at his will," for "he was the source of law."[8] Thus, the Orthodox Church, up until the end of the Byzantine Empire, was

mostly confined to religious matters, and unlike the Catholic Church, it did not generally extend its influence into the political domain.

A good example of this difference arose from the attempt of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II to seize Pope Sergius I (650-701) after he refused to sign the terms of planned imperial religious reforms. Historian Roger Collins explained, "When Sergius persisted in refusing to sign, the emperor sent Zacharias, the head of the imperial bodyguard, to arrest him. However, when units of the army of the exarch of Italy and of the Roman duchy discovered what was happening, they mutinied to stop the pope being carried off to Constantinople, and the terrified Zacharias had to hide under the pope's bed and be taken under Sergius' protection, before being ejected from the city.[9]"

Despite its importance, there were always some doubts about the legitimacy of the *Donation* itself, and much later it would prove to be apocryphal, most likely forged in the 8th century. Some would claim it to be "the most infamous forgery in the history of the world,"[10] but during the Middle Ages, it was still believed to be genuine and the *Donation* gave Rome the justification for a supreme authority over both monarchs and the other Sees, including the one in Constantinople. The Roman See thus believed it had authority over all Christians, and that the approval of the Eastern Church was not required to take control of any population.

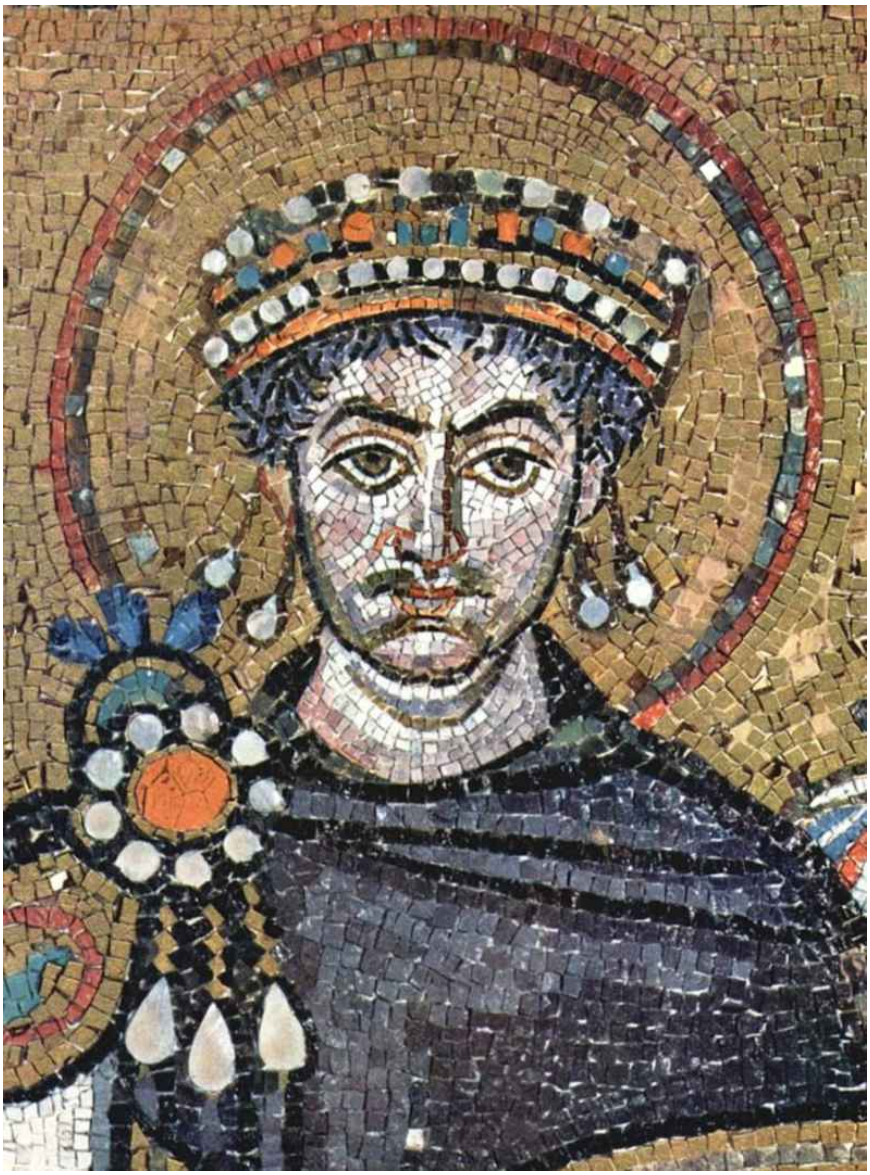
The *Donation of Constantine* also seemed to prove that papal authority was even above that of the self-proclaimed title of "ecumenical" used by Constantinople's patriarchs since John IV the Faster (d. 595), given that "only the pope had "ecumenical" authority, in the western view"[11]. John's decision to use this term was based on it being used already to refer to Constantinople's patriarchs in the previous century, although never before by the patriarch himself. John held a synod in Constantinople with this title, making Pope Pelagius II (579-590), prohibit "his legate at Constantinople to communicate with John"[12]. Following John the Faster, Constantinople's patriarchs continued to refer themselves as "ecumenical," though they generally refrained from mentioning in communications with Rome, as the Roman Church remained systematically opposed to it.

In times of crisis, particularly the invasions of Italy by Alaric and Attila in the 5th century, the Romans looked to their bishop as much as to their military leaders, and in the case of the Hunnish invasion of 452, it was Pope

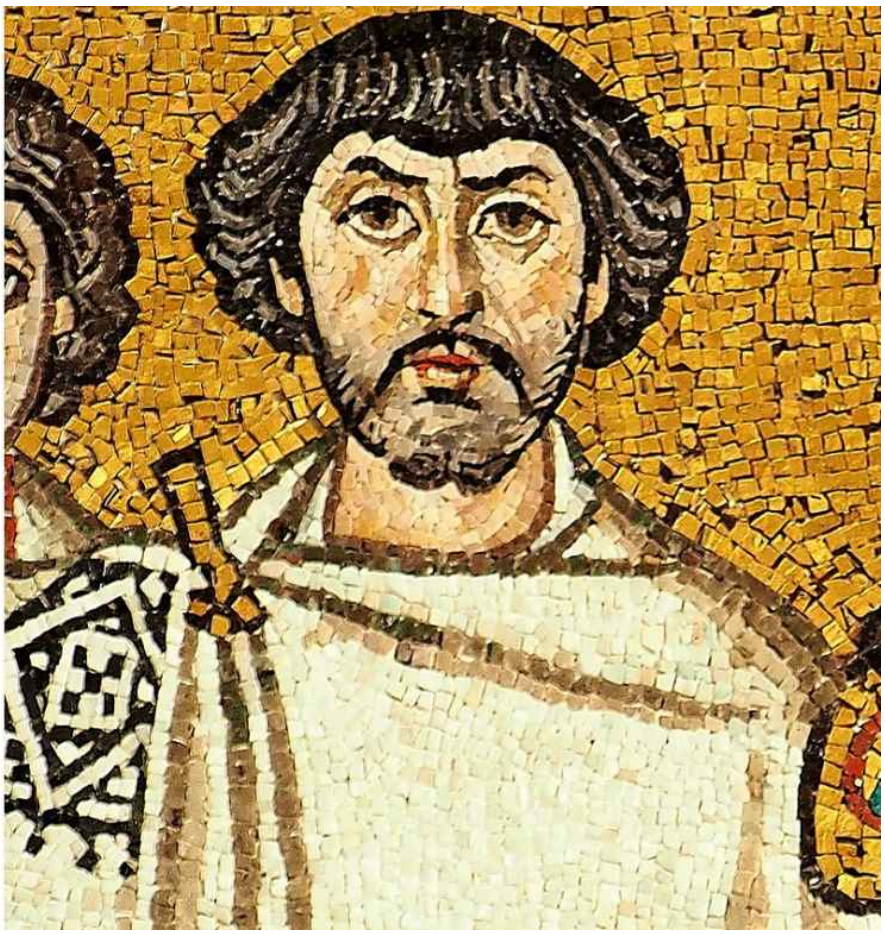
Leo I (r. 440-461) who persuaded Attila to spare the city. When it came to religious matters, however, the bishops of Rome frequently clashed with the emperors, who believed they possessed the right and responsibility to protect the Christian Church and ensure its orthodoxy. Ecumenical councils of the bishops were convened by their authority, and the imperial authority habitually intervened in doctrinal matters, a practice that dated back to Constantine. The bishops of Rome tolerated the former but regarded intervention in theological matters as an intrusion and an affront to their own prerogatives as "Vicars of Christ."[13] Moreover, the simple reality was that the emperors in Constantinople could not exercise direct power over the See of Rome because the city was ruled by the Ostrogoth kings of Italy.

Another cause of friction involved the bishops of Constantinople, elevated to the status of patriarchs and accorded pre-eminence over the Church after the pope. There were other differences over ritual and theology, but the dispute over who exercised supreme authority over the Christian Church was the principal issue between popes and emperors.

In the 6th century, the political distance between Constantinople and Rome shortened dramatically when Emperor Justinian I the Great (r. 527-565) invaded Italy. Justinian had a vision of the East and West being reunited, and after a period of vigorous financial, military and political reforms at home, he possessed the means to accomplish it. The brilliant Byzantine general Belisarius set foot in Sicily in 535 and by 554 had secured the entire Italian peninsula. The emperor subsequently appointed a *Praefectus* ("Prefect") in Ravenna to govern Italy and a *Praefectus urbani* ("Prefect of the City") in Rome. Almost immediately Belisarius began intervening in the affairs of the Roman Church, accusing Pope Silverius, elected in 536, of favouring the Goths. The pontiff was deposed and exiled to the beautiful but isolated island of Palmarola in the Tyrrhenian Sea, where he starved to death in 537.



Contemporary mosaic depicting Justinian



A contemporary mosaic believed to depict Belisarius

The emperor believed he had the right to appoint the bishop of Rome as he did the bishops in the East, and his approving gaze rested upon a Roman deacon named Vigilius, but once placed upon the Seat of Peter, the new pope became an obstacle to the emperor's will. In particular, he continued to condemn a heresy called Monophysitism as his predecessors had. The Monophysites held that there were not two natures in Christ - human and divine, as defined by the Ecumenical Council in Nicaea in 325 - but only one. Monophysitism threatened the unity of the empire, principally in the East, and Justinian, whose wife Theodora was a Monophysite, was attempting to reconcile the two opinions. Vigilius would allow no compromise.

Successive popes, while technically elected by the clergy and people of Rome, required the confirmation of the imperial court before they could be consecrated. The Latin-speaking churches, which included most of Italy,

North Africa, Spain and the dominions of the Franks, generally balked at this violation of what they viewed as the God-given rights and privileges of the Apostolic See. Still, there was no talk of breaking with the East or of denying the dominion of the emperors over Rome, nor did the emperors dare to break definitively with Rome on account of the prestige and honor it commanded. They did not seek to destroy the Roman Church but rather contain it.

Even by the 6th century, the Roman See was the largest landowner in Italy. Over the previous two centuries it had been richly endowed by the Italian nobility and possessed estates all over the peninsula, the most numerous and wealthy being in the vicinity of Rome, but other rich patrimonies existed in southern Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Liguria, the Pentapolis (later known as the Marches), Istria and the Isle of Capri. The Roman Church also boasted holdings in Dalmatia, North Africa, and Gaul. In fact, the region containing Rome was so dominated by the Church that it came to be known as *Patrimonium Petri*, the "Patrimony of Saint Peter." Anyone wanting to rule Italy therefore had to acknowledge the status of the Roman pontiff. It was probably this consideration that maintained the relationship between the emperors and popes rather than any deep respect for the latter's authority.

The relationship was put under more pressure with the arrival of the Lombards. The Lombards or Langobards were a Germanic people who originated in Scandinavia, and over a period of some 500 years they had migrated south through Germany. By 568, the year of their invasion of Italy, they inhabited Pannonia, the region west of the Danube which corresponds roughly to modern Austria. The 1st century historian Velleius Paterculus described them as "surpassing even the Germans [that is, the barbarians west of the Rhine] in savagery."[14] They differed from most other Germanic barbarians in that they possessed a rigidly stratified society in which the king and nobility took precedence over the general assembly. Their military was thus highly organized.

Powerless to repel them, Emperor Justinian granted the Lombards in Pannonia subsidies to fight the Gepids, another Germanic group which inhabited the Hungarian Plains and the region of the western Danube. In 552 the Lombard King Audoin crushed the Gepids at the Battle of Asfeld and afterwards famously drank wine from the skull of their king, Cunimund. The

remnants of the Gepid population merged with the Lombards, after which the Lombard chieftains cast their eyes toward Italy. The fertile valleys of Pannonia were limited by great forests and mountains, whereas the rich plains of northern Italy had been cultivated for a thousand years. Moreover, they were poorly defended. The long wars with the Goths had considerably weakened the imperial occupation force but more than that it had never recovered from a devastating Bubonic Plague epidemic that broke out in 541 and depopulated the empire. This "Plague of Justinian" had brought agricultural production and trade to an almost complete halt and it had devastated the army, ending Justinian's dream of restoring the West to imperial rule.

Around 150,000 Lombards and their barbarian confederates entered Italy in April 568, led by their new king, Alboin. As expected, they met with no resistance, and after a three-year siege, the fortress of Ticinium (Pavia) was taken and made the seat of the Lombard kingdom. As Alboin led his warriors down the Italian peninsula, the Romans fled toward the fortified settlements on the coast which could be more easily defended and supplied by imperial ships. Ravenna, the capital, was a formidable fortress and withstood the barbarian attacks. Likewise, Rome, though it was in a state of almost continual siege, held out. The region of the Apennines connecting Rome and Ravenna proved a defensible route of communication. The Marches, clinging to the citadels on the Adriatic (Rimini, Pesaro, Fano, Senigallia and Ancona), also resisted. Liguria, Venice, Istria, Gaeta, Naples, Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia remained in imperial hands.

This fresh invasion was different than the takeover by the Goths in 476. A century earlier, the Goths had taken pains to preserve the infrastructure and society of Roman civilization, including adopting the state religion and deferring to the emperor in Constantinople. The Lombards however already possessed a strong political framework from which to rule, and they established a kingdom divided into a number of duchies that laid waste to the civilization of its inhabitants. The Lombards did adopt Christianity, but not the religion of the empire – instead, they followed the teachings of Arius, a 4th century cleric who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Council of Nicaea had been called in 325 to condemn the heresy, but it was popular

with Germanic leaders because it placed them outside the jurisdiction of imperially-appointed bishops.

Requests for help from Emperor Justin II (r.565-578) were unwelcome because the Turkic people known as the Avars had occupied the space vacated by the Lombards in Pannonia and the Hungarian Plains and were crossing the Danube into Roman territory. At the same time, the Empire was at war with the Persians, so Justin II had neither the manpower nor the gold to spare. Nevertheless, the emperor did send a wholly inadequate army in 576 commanded by his son-in-law, Baduarius. The expedition was an utter failure and Baduarius was killed. Thereafter, help was infrequent and miniscule even when granted, so Italy was left to its own devices. The prefect of Italy was confined within the citadel of Ravenna, unable to break out and powerless to relieve any of the other beleaguered cities.

In desperation, Pope Pelagius II (r. 579-590) appealed to the Franks for help. Through Aunacharius, the bishop of Auxerre, he asked King Chilperic I to attack the Lombards or at least not form an alliance with them. The Franks were Catholics and as such might be expected to oppose the Arian Lombards. Moreover, they might be persuaded to invade the rich and fertile lands of northern Italy. They did but soon left, overcome by the more powerful temptation of Lombard gold.

In 584, Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602) enacted administrative reforms that he hoped would strengthen the frontiers of the empire. He replaced the prefects of the provinces with exarchs, governors possessing extensive military and civilian authority of a region. This meant that they could respond swiftly to crises without having to immediately consult the imperial court. Ravenna became the seat of the exarchate in Italy, though the exarch remained as impotent as the prefects had been.

The pope in Rome was both a source of support and annoyance to the exarch. It was natural enough that in the absence of help from Ravenna or Constantinople, imperial Italy should look to its chief bishop for help. The Romans tended to regard the exarch as a Greek-speaking foreigner at the service of an emperor who wanted to abolish their ancient rights and privileges.

Not long after the creation of the Exarchate of Italy, Pelagius II reminded Maurice of his responsibility to defend his subjects and urged him to send help. At the time there were no imperial troops to speak of in Rome, nor even a duke (a provincial governor appointed by the exarch) and the Exarch Decius could spare no troops. Through his successor Gregory, then *apocrisiarius* (ambassador to the imperial court), he wrote, "Here we are in such straits that unless God move the heart of the emperor to have pity on us, and send us a Master of the soldiery [*magister militum*] and a duke, we shall be entirely at the mercy of our enemies, as most of the district round Rome is without protection; and the army of these most unspeakable people will take possession of the places still held for the empire."[15]

Ultimately, no help was forthcoming from Constantinople. With Ravenna powerless and the Franks bought off, Pelagius did the only thing he could do: drawing upon the hefty treasury of the Roman Church, he bought an armistice with the Lombards in 585. Neither Constantinople nor Ravenna approved of the action, and Pelagius must have very reluctantly agreed to it, but either way it established a dangerous precedent, as there was no guarantee the Lombards would honor the armistice. Of course, the alternative was the fall of Rome and the subjection of St. Peter's See to the "barbarian" heretics.

For the time being the Lombards held off, but the crisis was not over and more woes were to befall Rome. In the winter of 589, torrential rains caused the Tiber to burst its banks, destroying many houses and buildings, including the public granaries which had allowed the Romans to withstand the Lombard siege for so long. The waters raged nearly 20 miles to the sea, fouling drinking water, washing away fields, and rendering the vital port of Ostia unusable. Writing from Tours in Francia, Gregory, still a bishop, wrote of great dragons and serpents being seen and carried on the waters. These were cast on the land and produced a most foul stench.[16] The people faced famine, and the unhygienic environment brought further disease. Moreover, the Lombards might now be tempted to break the truce.

Incredibly, the worst was yet to come. Signs of pestilence first appeared in February 590, including fever, seizures, boils that erupted blood and pus, gangrenous blackening of the skin, vomiting of blood, and finally intense agony caused by muscle cramps. The malady struck suddenly and killed its

victim within a few days. It was caused by *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that killed millions during the Plague of Justinian from 541-542 and the same that would take away a third or more of the population of Europe during the Black Death from 1347-1361.

The historical memory of the last plague was still painfully fresh, and a number of those who lived through it were still alive. One of the first victims of the Roman plague was Pelagius. Gregory of Tours, alluding to the horror in apocalyptic tones, quoted the prophet Ezekiel, "Utterly destroy old and young, maidens, children and women: but upon whomsoever you shall see the sign of the cross, kill him not, and begin ye at my sanctuary."[17]

As the chief priest of the sanctuary lay dying on his bed in the Lateran Palace in early February 590, the clergy and nobility of Rome discussed the matter of the succession. Whoever followed Pelagius would have to be a man of extraordinary ability, leadership, and stamina. He would need to deal with the plague, the famine, and the Lombards. On top of all that, he would have to be acceptable to the emperor in Constantinople.

In the minds of many, there was only one person for the job.

The Election of Gregory

Gregorius Anicius was born around 540 in Rome to noble parents named Gordianus and Silvia. His father was a member of the Roman Senate, which by that point had been truncated and stripped of most of its functions, and he had also been Prefect of the City of Rome. He appears to have been descended from Pope Felix III (r.483-492), which was possible because the rigid statutes governing clerical celibacy had not yet been enacted. Indeed, Gordianus seems to have been a cleric himself, since he served as a *regionarius*, an ecclesiastical official entrusted with the care of one of the urban districts.[18] Gordianus was also one of the principal Roman landowners and was one of the most powerful men in Rome in his time.

Gregorius and his brother were brought up piously and with the sense of public duty attached to a family of noble lineage. He was raised in a thoroughly Roman tradition and excelled at his studies. Gregorius entered government, rose rapidly, and was appointed Prefect of Rome at the age of 33 around the year 573. It is likely then that he worked closely with Pope

John III (r. 561-574) and Pope Benedict I (r. 575-579) at the time of the Lombard invasion, but despite his aptitude for affairs of state, he quietly longed for a simple, more contemplative life secluded from the harshness and hypocrisy of the political world.

Shortly after Gregory's appointment as prefect, his father died, and with that, Gregory saw an opportunity to leave the world and had the family palace on the Caelian Hill converted into a monastery which still stands as the Monastery of Saint Gregory the Great (*San Gregorio al Celio*). In his time, however, it was known as Saint Andrew's Monastery. Personal asceticism was certainly not new in Western Christianity, nor was the practice of living such a life. Indeed, Congregations of either men or women regulated by a fixed set of rules and codes of conduct were however something of a novelty in 6th century Italy. A common rule for monasteries and convents was introduced by Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543) in 516. The first and most famous of the monasteries existing under the Rule of Saint Benedict was Monte Cassino about 100 miles south of Rome, and it would be unusual if the young Gregory had not visited it.

The façade of *San Gregorio al Celio*

However it happened, Gregory set aside the robes of a Roman nobleman and donned a simple unadorned robe of undyed wool. It is uncertain whether he used Benedict's Rule for the Monastery of Saint Andrew or wrote one himself based on it. In any case he was undoubtedly inspired by the Benedictine movement, but either way, he seems not to have entirely abandoned the riches of the world, for he endowed six other monasteries on his family estates and gifted property to the Church.

Throughout this time, he was not attached to the goods of this world, and the thought of using them for his personal benefit repelled him. His attitude to the mammon of iniquity is illustrated in his treatment of a monk on his deathbed who confessed to possessing three pieces of gold. Gregory punished him by condemning him to die alone. When he did die, the monk's corpse was thrown on a pile of excrement with the gold pieces, along with a

farewell that read “take your gold with you to perdition.” The spectacle was intended as a salutary warning, and Gregory later had 30 masses offered for the repose of the monk’s soul. People today may balk at the thought of someone being purposely abandoned at the point of death to make a point about religious observance, but there is no doubting Gregory’s devotion to a life of prayer, poverty, chastity, and bodily mortification. He described his experiences in the monastery as the happiest in his life, and there is little reason to doubt his sincerity.[19]

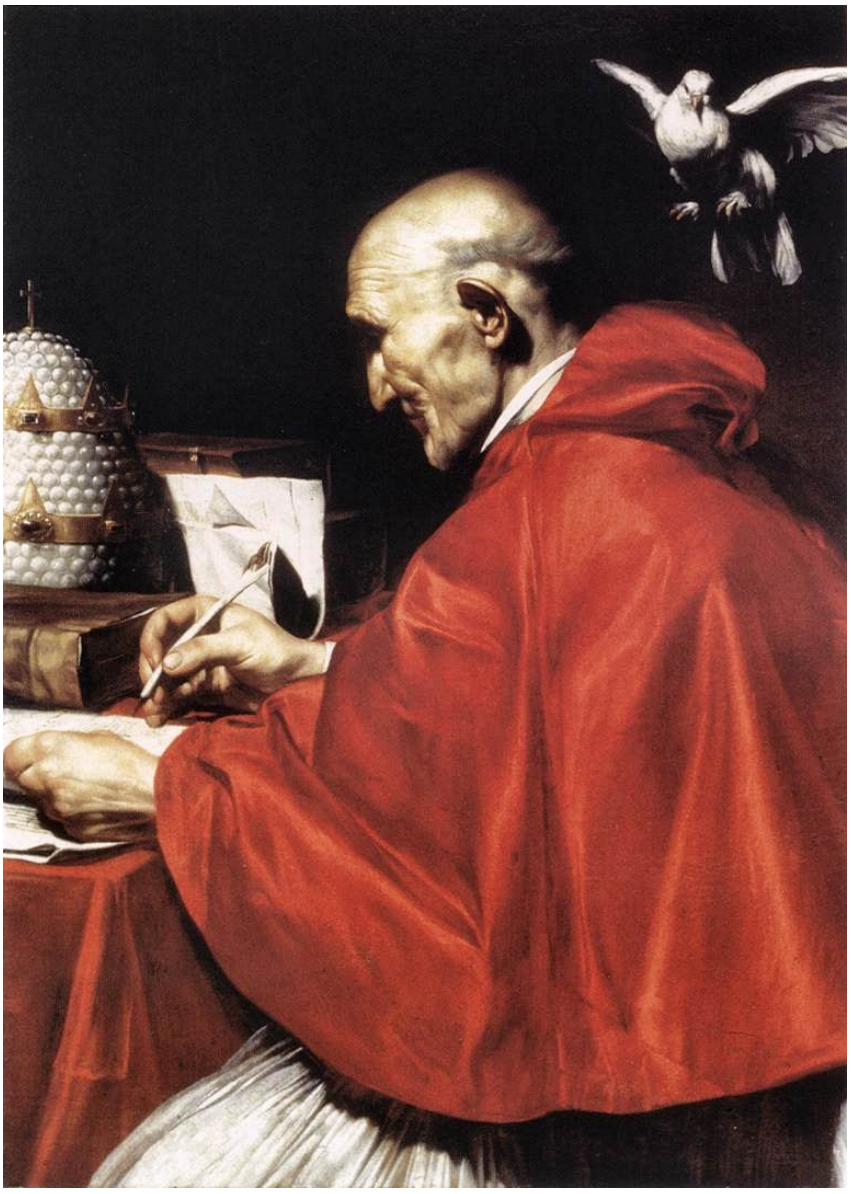
However, Gregory’s happiness was frequently interrupted by summonses from the Lateran Palace. He might have been a monk, but he was still one of the most powerful and influential men in Rome, and in 578 Pope Benedict ordained him a deacon and one of the *regionarii* of Rome. At that time deacons possessed far greater authority than they do in the Catholic Church today, and Gregory assisted the pope during the Lombard crisis. The distribution of food and alms, some of the most important functions of the Roman deacons, must have figured prominently in that role.

When Pelagius II first sat upon the pontifical seat, Gregory was almost dragged from his monastery again, this time to don the fine robes of office again as *apocrisiarius* to the court at Constantinople. *Apocrisiarii* were ecclesiastical envoys with special status sent by rulers of the patriarchates in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem to the imperial court. It soon became apparent to Gregory that Emperor Maurice had no intention of diverting troops from the Avar and Persian wars; in fact, the emperor was in fact annoyed with the persistence of the Romans. Thus, Gregory strove to cultivate the attention of the aristocracy, but despite being popular in a number of circles, he elicited little concrete support. Moreover, he attracted odium on account of a theological dispute with Patriarch Eutychius of Constantinople, on a subject of no great import.[20]

Gregory returned to Rome in 585, owning his failure to Pelagius and advising him that in his view future appeals would be futile. Thereupon he secluded himself again in his beloved monastery on the Caelian Hill, where he lectured and wrote extensively on the scriptures for an ever-growing congregation of monks. It was during this time that the famous meeting with the Angles (“they are not Angles but angels”) occurred, though they were probably not slaves as the Venerable Bede believed.[21]

Pelagius II gave his approval for Gregory to head a mission to England, but the public outcry was such that the permission was withdrawn.[22] This perhaps indicates that the Roman people already saw Gregory as the successor of Pelagius. The pope certainly made use of him frequently for both temporal and spiritual concerns, and Gregory came to be the seen as the defender of Rome and the Roman Church. As a result, it must have come as a surprise to very few when in 590 he was chosen to be the pope.

By that time, the chronicler Paul the Deacon described the older Gregory as balding with a tawny beard, somewhat hooked nose, and thick lips.[23] He suffered constantly from ill health, being subject to bad indigestion, fevers and gout. Nevertheless, he was restless, constantly attending to some matter or another, and his assistants and advisors were astonished at the minutiae to which he would give his attention.



Jose de Ribera's painting depicting Gregory

That said, for all his diligence, he found the burden of temporal concerns loathsome. Indeed, if the adage attributed to the writer Douglas Adams, that those who want to exercise power are the least qualified to do so,[24] is true, Gregory would seem to have been the most qualified.

It was with horror that Gregory received the delegation announcing the decision of the Roman clergy and people. He initially refused the honor, but he eventually relented and agreed to act as caretaker for the Church until the Emperor Maurice either confirmed or annulled the election. Normally he

would have resented, as all Romans did, the necessity of gaining the imperial consent, but in his own case, he clung to the hope that Emperor Maurice would order a fresh election. Perhaps he had made himself sufficiently troublesome in Constantinople that the emperor would refuse him, and he went so far as to compose a letter to Maurice begging him to deny him the papacy. However, that letter was intercepted by the prefect Germanus and replaced with a letter merely stating the result of the election.

Gregory was certainly reluctant, but he was fully aware of what needed to be done. In his mind, the first concern was the plague and the demoralizing effect it was having on the city. He shared the belief of most of his compatriots that the pestilence was sent by God for the punishment of the wicked and the trial of the just.

In his work, he struggled to come to terms with the savagery of the epidemic: "During these times there was a pestilence, by which the whole human race came near to being annihilated. Now in the case of all other scourges sent from heaven some explanation of a cause might be given by daring men, such as the many theories propounded by those who are clever in these matters; for they love to conjure up causes which are absolutely incomprehensible to man, and to fabricate outlandish theories of natural philosophy knowing well that they are saying nothing sound but considering it sufficient for them, if they completely deceive by their argument some of those whom they meet and persuade them to their view. But for this calamity it is quite impossible either to express in words or to conceive in thought any explanation, except indeed to refer it to God. For it did not come in a part of the world nor upon certain men, nor did it confine itself to any season of the year, so that from such circumstances it might be possible to find subtle explanations of a cause, but it embraced the entire world, and blighted the lives of all men, though differing from one another in the most marked degree, respecting neither sex nor age."[25]

Gregory organized a procession of the clergy and people of Rome, who would leave the Seven Hills of Rome and converge on the Basilica of Saint Mary Major on the Esquiline Hill. Rome was not the great metropolis it used to be when an emperor resided there and it had a population of at least 500,000, if not more. In the wake of the 5th century invasions, the sackings and the consequent economic decline vastly depopulated the city. In

Gregory's time, it likely had 35,000 inhabitants, and after floods, famine, and the plague of 589-90, Rome may have had even fewer people. The cultural and political focus of Rome was directed toward the great basilicas and churches which had been temples and the houses of ancient patricians, and the seats of government such as the Lateran Palace. Ancient monuments such as the Colosseum and Forum were already neglected and decaying, and the spaces vacated were used to graze livestock. The great aqueducts remained untended for lack of gold and manpower. Given all that, the procession was likely not a vast thronging group but a relatively small group of thousands winding their way through a half-ruined city.

Led by the pope-elect, the people chanted the *Litania Sanctorum,* Litany of the Saints, which is still used in the Roman Catholic Church today and still contains the invocation "from plague, famine and war, deliver us, O Lord." According to the *Golden Legend*, a 13th century compilation of lives of the saints, Gregory carried a portrait of the Virgin Mary, supposedly painted by the evangelist Saint Luke and sent from Constantinople for the occasion.[26] Catholic tradition maintains that the painting titled *Salus Populi Romani* ("Salvation of the Roman People") in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major is the same borne by Gregory. The clergy headed the procession swinging burning thurifers, which not only signified the prayers of the people ascending to God but also purified the air. According to medical theory at the time, pestilence was caused by foul air or *miasma* (a theory not refuted until the 19th century), so it was believed that sweet odors such as that produced by incense restored its purity.

Salus Populi Romani

With people dying from the plague even as they walked, the procession reached the right bank of the Tiber. There they passed the ancient mausoleum built in the 2nd century to house the ashes of the Emperor Hadrian. According to legend, onlookers saw the Archangel Michael sheath his sword on the peak of the monument, and at the same time the plague abated. In memory of the event, the mausoleum, which later became later a fortress, was renamed Castel Sant'Angelo, and to this day a statue of the angel returning his sword to its scabbard can be seen on top.

Toby Jorgenson's picture of Castel Sant'Angelo

Regardless of the reasons, the Roman Plague had run its course by the end of 590, and it is probable that it had burnt itself out, killing the fleas which bore the bacterium and the rats which carried the fleas. In an age that ascribed all malignancies to the intervention of God, however, the procession must have boosted the morale of the people, and it would have been natural enough to attribute the end of the pestilence to Gregory's intercession with the Almighty. The plague would return to Italy periodically over the course of the next 150 years, but not again during Gregory's lifetime.

Next, Gregory applied himself to the material relief of the people of Rome, bringing in grain and gold from the Church's estates in Italy. He set about rebuilding the granaries and restoring the damaged port at Ostia, but he did not think he would be in a position of responsibility for very long. Operating under the false assumption that his letter had reached Constantinople, he expected his election to be annulled, but in July 590, word came that Maurice had confirmed the election and authorized the installation of Gregory as pope. The emperor must have realized that he was clearly the choice of the people and the only man capable of dealing with the gargantuan challenges facing Rome. Gregory appears to have been genuinely

horrified, and the legend was that he had to be dragged to the episcopal chair for his consecration.[27]

While that story might've been apocryphal, Gregory hated the burdens of office, which he viewed as a threat to his peace of mind and spiritual joy. In his *Regulae Pastoralis* (*Pastoral Care*), a tome still widely regarded as an excellent guide for people in positions of authority, he wrote, "Often the care of government, when undertaken, distracts the heart in various directions; and one is found unequal to dealing with particular things, while with confused mind divided among many. Whence a certain wise man providently dissuades, saying, *my son, meddle not with many matters* Sirach 11:10; because, that is, the mind is by no means collected on the plan of any single work while parted among various. And, when it is drawn abroad by unwonted care, it is emptied of the solidity of inward fear: it becomes anxious in the ordering of things that are without, and, ignorant of itself alone, knows how to think of many things, while itself it knows not. For, when it implicates itself more than is needful in things that are without, it is as though it were so occupied during a journey as to forget where it was going; so that, being estranged from the business of self-examination, it does not even consider the losses it is suffering, or know how great they are."[28]

Nevertheless, he continued, "There are some also who fly by reason only of their humility, lest they should be preferred to others to whom they esteem themselves unequal. And theirs, indeed, if it be surrounded by other virtues, is then true humility before the eyes of God, when it is not pertinacious in rejecting what it is enjoined to undertake with profit. For neither is he truly humble, who understands how the good pleasure of the Supernal Will ought to bear sway, and yet contemns its sway. But, submitting himself to the divine disposals, and averse from the vice of obstinacy, if he be already prevented with gifts whereby he may profit others also, he ought, when enjoined to undertake supreme rule, in his heart to flee from it, but against his will to obey."[29]

Once installed, Gregory dedicated himself to the protection of the Roman people and the Church. The truce bought by Pelagius would not last forever, if indeed at all, and the exarch in Ravenna had provided but a small garrison for the city which would not be able to hold out against a concerted assault, let alone drive the Lombards beyond the walls. The exarch had not assigned

a military commander to Rome, a *dux* (duke) empowered to take whatever measures were necessary to defend the city. Perhaps he believed a duke would be an unsupportable drain on imperial resources, or even that a duke would find himself directed by the pope rather than Ravenna. In any case, he could not have been surprised when he learned that Gregory had decided to take up the defense of Rome himself.

The Rise of the Papal States

In 592 the fragile peace brokered by Pelagius II had broken down, and Duke Ariulf of Spoleto invaded the corridor between Rome and Ravenna, cutting communications between the two cities. He then appeared before the walls of Rome. At the same time, the Lombard Duke of Benevento threatened Naples, which had neither a bishop nor a *dux,* so Gregory took the unprecedented step of appointing a commander on his own authority. To justify his measures, the pope wrote to Emperor Maurice of Romans being seized outside the walls and dragged off to slavery "like dogs,"[30] and of others being butchered and women violated. The grain supply was running out, and in desperation some citizens left the city to brave the Lombard blockade, only to be killed or captured.

In a commentary on the Book of Ezechiel, Gregory described the sad scene: "Cities, castles, farms are destroyed; the land is laid waste. No peasants remain in the fields; the cities are almost empty. Those who remain are pitilessly stricken; imprisoned, mutilated, slain. And Rome, the one-time mistress of the world, to what do we see her reduced? Assailed by every misfortune, her citizens ruined, assaulted by enemies, her buildings in collapse..."[31]

Again on his own authority, Gregory approached Ariulf and succeeded in negotiating a peace. The terms of the treaty are unknown, but whatever they were, they angered the exarch Romanus. It could be that a concession of Roman territory, including the Rome-Ravenna corridor, was involved, for if it was simply a matter of Church gold passing hands, as in Pelagius's time, the exarch could hardly have objected. For some reason, Romanus annulled the treaty by attacking the Lombards in force and recapturing the city of Perugia in Umbria, a key fortress of the imperial corridor between Rome and Ravenna. He then marched to Rome, where he was received with pomp,

ceremony, and rejoicing. It's unknown what the conversations were between him and Gregory, but it's likely he was upset at the pope for forcing him to expose the precious army of Ravenna to danger. Gregory could have countered that if he'd had sufficient defenses of his own, he would not have needed to negotiate with the Lombards.

In the Spring of 592, Romanus left the city with his army, leaving Rome with a miniscule garrison. His attentions were required elsewhere, but as soon as he left, King Agilulf of the Lombards in Northern Italy marched on Rome and laid siege to it. The Lombards once again terrorized the Patrimony of Saint Peter.

An unnamed medieval source[32] wrote that Gregory received Agilulf on the steps of the Basilica of Saint Peter, then outside the walls of Rome. If the event, which Gregory himself did not mention, happened at all, it would have exposed the bishop to grave danger of death or kidnapping, yet the same author claimed that the king agreed to lift the siege after "being melted by Gregory's prayers." That Agilulf did lift the siege at that time is clear, but it is more likely that he was moved by Roman gold, not the personal charisma of the pope.

Gregory complained to his advisors that he had been made bishop not of the Romans but of the Lombards, as they commanded the bulk of his attention. The remark however was more than ironic, since Gregory had decided that, in the absence of any military force to speak of, the Lombards needed to be tolerated and cultivated. If they could not be defeated, perhaps they could be converted. He was by now convinced that neither Ravenna nor Constantinople would help, and that he would have to initiate the project himself. He would have to circumvent the exarch without being seen to be undermining the imperial authorities.

As expected, Ravenna frowned upon a strategy that would legitimize the Lombard presence and concede imperial territory. Gregory himself did not approach the Lombards naively, for he warned his negotiators that Lombard treaties were "two-edged swords."[33] Nevertheless, he set about negotiating a peace settlement by employing Constantius, the Archbishop of Milan as a go-between. Theodore, Curator of Ravenna, was willing to cooperate.

There were advantages for peace as far as the Lombards were concerned. A state of constant war did bring a healthy supply of slaves and booty, but there were greater benefits in consolidating their own dominions and perhaps even trading with the Byzantine Empire. A peace was finally signed in 598. Gregory did not put his hand to it, not wishing to appear siding with either the Lombards or the Romans. It appeared to be a deal worked out between the Lombards and imperials, though there was little doubt that the peace was the pope's doing. Most of the Lombards' possessions were recognised as were the remaining imperial territories. Moreover, Gregory was allowed to salvage what remained of Christianity in the ravaged dominions of the Lombards. He reorganized the churches and monasteries, appointed bishops where there were none, and rebuilt churches. This allowed Rome to extend its influence into Lombardy and perhaps give the Romans a chance to convert them to what the pope considered to be authentic Christianity.

The pope's efforts showed signs of success. The new exarch, Callinicus, appeared to come around to supporting the armistice. Queen Theodelinda of the Lombards, the widow of King Authari, embraced Catholicism, as did many of the Lombard nobility. She persuaded her new husband King Agilulf to be baptized along with their son. Moreover they built and endowed a church in Monza, near Milan, where he placed the Crown of Lombardy dedicated to Saint John. How sincerely he intended to honor the agreement with Rome is perhaps suggested by the title *Rex totius Italiae* ("King of all Italy") he had inscribed on that crown, but for the time being the peace held.

As it turned out, it was the exarch who dealt the blow that broke the truce. In 601, the Lombard dukes of Tridentum (Trent) and Forum Julii (Friuli) rebelled against King Agilulf, and Callinicus saw an opportunity to weaken the Lombard king. He sent an expedition into northern Italy and captured the king's daughter Gundeberga, along with her husband Arioald at Parma. Agilulf retaliated by invading the exarchate, taking Padua, and ravaging Istria. Eventually, the Lombards defeated Callinicus outside Ravenna itself.

In the meantime, Emperor Maurice had been replaced by Emperor Phocas (r. 602-610), a former centurion elevated to the throne by the disgruntled army fighting the Avars in the Balkans. Gregory welcomed the new emperor, whom he praised as a liberator.[34] The politically astute pontiff understood that the promises of emperors were not to be trusted, but he encouraged

Phocas in the hope that the new Byzantine emperor would be more interested in Italy than his predecessor. Indeed, Italy was important in the wars with the Avars, for a strong presence there would contain the Lombards.

Phocas knew full well that the same army which elevated him might just as easily depose him if he did not gain the upper hand in the Balkans. He needed Ravenna to ensure communications between Italy and the Balkans, and also to ensure the Lombards did not come to the aid of the Avars. He therefore recalled Callinicus in 603 and replaced him with Smaragdus, who had been exarch from 585-589 and had a reputation for severity. His violence toward the bishops of northern Italy in a state of revolt against Rome was the cause of his own recall, but now Phocas wanted someone who would show no mercy.

The new exarch attempted an alliance with the Franks and the Avars, which quickly failed, and with the help of the Avars, Agilulf captured the lands of the exarchate between the Po and the Apennines, including Cremona, Mantua, and Brescello. The Lombard ruler was now poised to march on Ravenna, which compelled Smaragdus to release the king's daughter and son-in-law. In 605, a peace was then negotiated which conceded much of the Po Valley, and it essentially recognized the Lombards as legitimate rulers in Italy.

Agilulf was almost certainly grateful for peace. He had been intermittently at war with the Avars and Slavs and was constantly looking over his shoulder toward Francia and Bavaria. Furthermore, the peace drove a wedge between the emperor and exarch and Rome. It was a Roman peace engineered by Pope Gregory, and it had forced the imperial hand. Italy was now divided between three powers: Lombardy, the Roman Church, and the exarchate in Ravenna, with the last being the weakest.

For all this, however, the pope still needed Ravenna, because without the exarchate, nothing prevented the Lombards from taking Rome, even if they were converting to Catholicism. For this reason Gregory continued to support Emperor Phocas. He had portraits of the sovereign and his empress enthroned in the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill, and he erected statues of the royal couple. On the one hand, such actions would probably have been customary, but on the other, it would have been important to tell the emperor

that the Gregorian peace was not usurping imperial authority. Gregory was even prepared to tolerate imperial interference in the affairs of the Roman Church in order to keep the emperor's faith.

At the same time, this was not to say he did not intervene in the affairs of the Eastern Church. He regularly heard the appeals of bishops, confirmed or vetoed the decisions of synods, and even punished clerics. He also did not refrain from remonstrating when he believed the essential rights of the See of Rome were being violated. Throughout his reign he objected to the title "Ecumenical Patriarch" approved for the patriarchs of Constantinople as an affront to the primacy of the Roman Church.

Gregory was also careful to establish his own authority where the emperors could not reach. He tightened relationships between the Roman Church and those of Francia and Visigothic Spain. He also famously chose Augustine of Canterbury to establish a mission to the English at Kent, in fulfilment of a mission that he was prevented from undertaking himself. He was, however, not motivated by the desire to make himself a kind of emperor of the West independent of the emperor in Constantinople. On the contrary, all the historical testimony and his own voluminous writings attest to the fact he was driven by both a sincere desire for the spiritual good of his fellow people and a horror for the burdens of government. Pope Gregory never ceased to be a monk and continually craved the seclusion of the cloister. In fact, he converted the Lateran Palace into a monastery as much as he could, removing laypersons from office and replacing them with clerics. Gregory can be viewed as the individual who transformed the Roman government into a theocracy. When the papacy lost the temporal rule of Rome in 1870, clerics were still being appointed as regional governors, and education, science, and justice were subject to ecclesiastical authorities.

It is also important to note Gregory's attitude toward religions other than his own, in particular that of the Jews. Writing to Paschasius, the bishop of Naples, he admonished:

> "Those who, with sincere intent, desire to lead people outside the Christian religion to the correct faith ought to make the effort by means of what is pleasant, not with what is harsh, lest opposition drive afar the mind of men whom reasoning...could

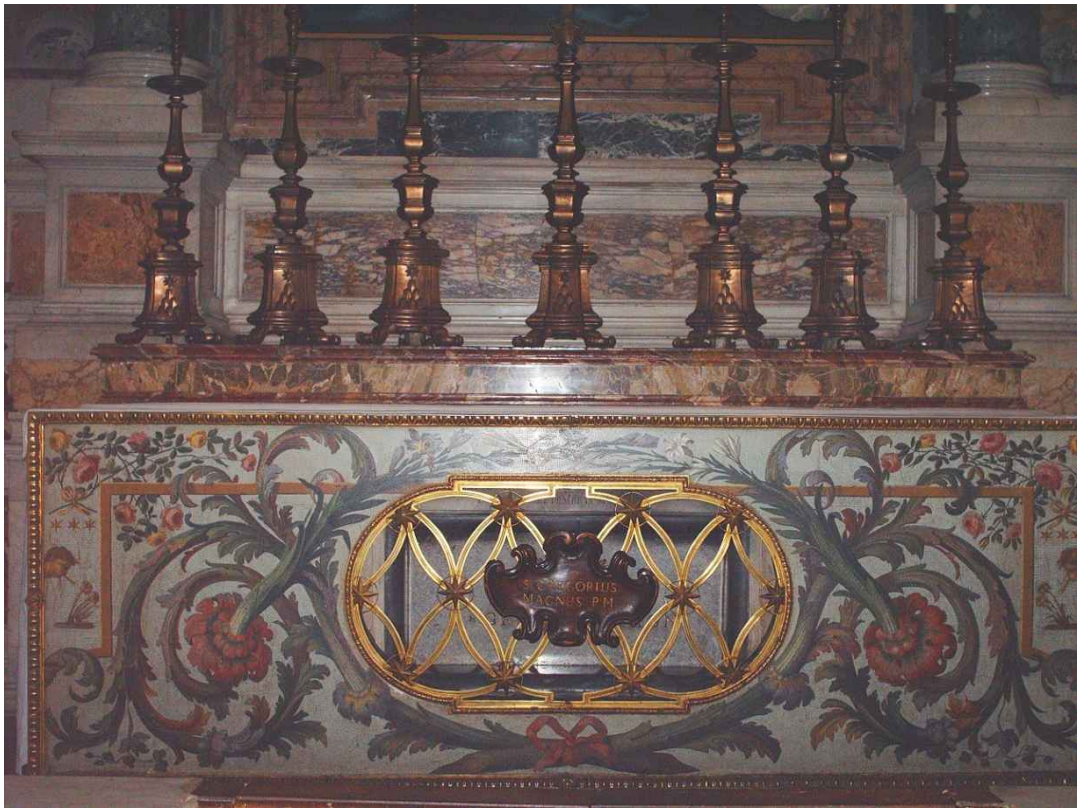
> have attracted. Those who act otherwise...demonstrate that they are concerned with their own enterprises, rather than with those of God!
>
> "Now, the Jews dwelling in Naples have registered a complaint with Us, asserting that certain people are attempting, in an unreasonable fashion, to restrain them from some of the solemnities connected with their own feast days, as it has been lawful for them to observe or celebrate these up to now, and for their forefathers from long ages past...For of what use is this, when...it avails nothing toward their faith and conversion?...One must act, therefore, in such a way that...they might desire to follow us rather than to fly from us...Rather let them enjoy their lawful liberty to observe and to celebrate their festivities, as they have enjoyed this up until now."[35]

He did write that Jews should be permitted "liberty of action, so far as the law permitted, both in civil affairs and in the worship of the synagogue,"[36] but he was a man of his time and was not religiously tolerant as people in the modern era. For example, he did not allow Jews to own Christian slaves, but it did not seem odious to the Romans that Christians should own slaves. Nevertheless, these and other writings indicate that Gregory considered securing the good of the individual the first step toward building a just and peaceful society. Certainly, his attitude toward the Lombards displayed a wisdom and tolerance that was not shared by most of his political contemporaries.

Despite the pope's aversion to temporal glory, his authority tended to fill the vacuum in the West left when the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, was deposed in 476. The pope would continue to do so until 800, when Charlemagne would allow himself to be crowned Emperor of the West in Rome upon receiving his crown from the bishop of Rome. This last event created modern Europe and was the culmination of two centuries of papal policy aimed at securing its independence from Constantinople.

Toward the end of his reign, Pope Gregory appears to have suffered from a form of melancholy, perhaps depression, and it would be easy to see how it would have brought on or be exacerbated by his constant exertions. He

struggled at all times to reconcile his desire to withdraw from the world with his responsibilities in the temporal sphere. In fact, he longed for death as the only means of escaping this agony, and when he died in Rome on March 12, 604, he was about 64.



The Tomb of St. Gregory in St. Peter's

The outpouring of grief was entirely genuine, not so much on account of his religiosity and erudition but his love of the people, especially the poor. He considered the care of the poor and sick his first priority, and he took great pains to provide for the needy. In fact, he chastised his vicars who did not share his passion. On one occasion he rebuked his representative in Sicily, writing, "I asked you most of all to take care of the poor. And if you knew of people in poverty, you should have pointed them out ... I desire that you give the woman, Pateria, forty *solidi* for the children's shoes and forty bushels of grain.."[37] If his ministers appeared slow in relieving the burdens of the poor, he would simply replace them.

Thus, it was his zeal for the poor and his defense of Rome against the Lombards that won the hearts of the Italian people. By the end of the 9th

century, he was being referred to as “Gregory the Great,”[38] an epithet still applied to him, though probably more now for his political achievements than his care of the poor.

Saint Gregory’s Legacy

After Gregory, Queen Theodolinda maintained the peace, but after her, the Lombard kings continued their war against the Romans. In 723, Byzantine Emperor Leo III (r. 717-741) demanded that Rome empty its treasury for his war with the Arabs. Pope Gregory II (r. 715-731) needed gold to defend the city and feed its population, so he refused. The Roman populace supported the pope and expelled the imperially-appointed Duke Marinus, who was implicated in a plot to murder Pope Gregory II. Whether Leo himself was involved is uncertain. Meanwhile, the exarch of Ravenna was unable to impose the imperial will on Gregory owing to pressure from the Lombard King Liutprand (r. 712-744).

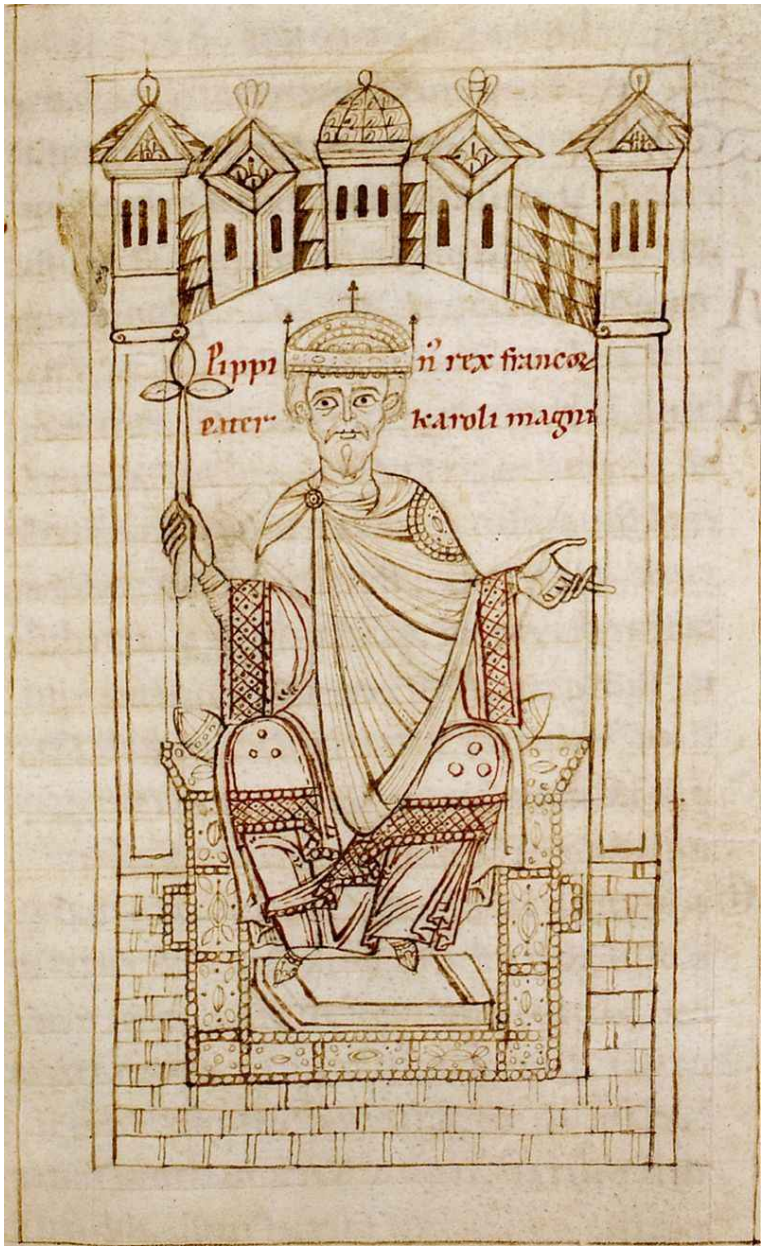
Another of the interminable religious disputes originating in the East further eroded imperial authority in Italy. Emperor Leo III forbade the veneration of religious images via an edict in 730, initiating a seismic schism within the Church. The pope could not acquiesce in the destruction of the images and excommunicated Leo and the exarch Paul. The people of Rome, Ravenna, and the Pentapolis rebelled against the imperial decree, and the military of the exarchate declared its intention of electing its own emperor. Paul died while attempting to suppress the rebellion, and when the rebels sent a delegation to Rome to ask the pope’s blessing, Gregory II would not give it. He may not have believed Italy was strong enough to stand by itself, or he may have been reluctant to help depose a monarch appointed by God. Whatever the reason, he persuaded the army to remain loyal.

It was a purely nominal loyalty however, for the crisis had established definitively that Rome and not Ravenna ruled imperial Italy. Liutprand also supported the pope, for even though Gregory II would not sacrifice Ravenna, the rift between Rome and Ravenna benefited him. The king even made a donation of territory to Gregory personally, namely the important city of Sutri on the route from Rome to Ravenna, in 728. This was the first donation of land to the Roman Church in its own sovereignty.

An attempt by the new exarch, Eutychius, to assassinate Gregory II on Leo's orders in the year of the Donation of Sutri failed. This was quite clearly an admission that the Byzantine Empire had lost control of Rome, and Eutychius was the last exarch of Ravenna. In 743 the city would have fallen to Liutprand had not the would-be murderer of Gregory II begged Pope Zachary (r. 741-752) to persuade the Lombard king to withdraw. Regardless, in 751, King Aistulf conquered the city and the exarchate came to an end. The Romans still clung onto Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, and the furthest regions of Apulia and Calabria, but for all intents and purposes they were finished as a power in Italy.

This new situation left the papacy alone against the Lombards at the height of their power. In theory Rome was still under the emperor, but in practice the pope oversaw every aspect of the city's governance, including the military. For the time being the popes remained on cordial terms with the Lombards, but they still reached out to their powerful neighbors, the Franks. Fortunately for the papacy, the rulers of the Franks were Catholics and naturally looked to Rome rather than Constantinople for spiritual guidance.

In 751, Pepin, the Frankish Mayor of the Palace, exercised power in the name of the impotent King Childeric III. Upon finding himself in a political quandary, he sent a delegation to Pope Zachary asking whether it was seemly that the individual who actually ruled should not bear the title king. The pope, delighted at the opportunity of ingratiating himself with the Franks, replied that he thought it fitting that the man who ruled should also have the title king. Pepin accordingly deposed Childeric and had himself crowned king of the Franks. This represented the first instance of a pope exercising authority in a secular matter outside of Italy, and the fact Pepin thought he needed Pope Zachary's authorization suggests that the Franks regarded the papacy as an imperial authority, a successor to the defunct Western Roman emperors. The new dynasty of Frankish kings now owed their crown to the bishop of Rome.



A medieval miniature of Pepin

In 752, Pope Zachary died and was replaced by Stephen II (d. 757), who called upon the Franks to repay the favor when King Aistulf demanded the submission of Rome. For the first time, a pope voluntarily left Italy, met Pepin at Soissons, and secured from him a promise to invade Italy and restore the imperial territories, not to the Byzantine emperor but to Rome. In 756, the Frankish king led an army against Aistulf and forced him to surrender his imperial conquests to the Church. These included Ravenna and

Romagna, the Pentapolis (later known as the Marches), and the Rome-Ravenna corridor.

History generally recognizes this Donation of Pepin as the beginning of the Papal States, but the popes had already exercised temporal authority for two centuries or more. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a medieval biography of the popes, describes the gift: "Having acquired all these cities, he [Pepin] issued a document of donation, for the perpetual possession of them by St. Peter and the Roman Church and all the pontiffs of the apostolic see. This document is still preserved in the archives of our holy church. The Most Christian king of the Franks sent his counsellor Fulrad, a venerable abbot and priest, to receive the cities, and he himself at once set out happily with his armies to return to France. The said venerable abbot and priest, Fulrad, came to the region of Ravenna with emissaries of King Aistulf, and, entering all the cities of the Pentapolis and Emilia, he took possession of them and also took hostages from among the leading men of each city and obtained the keys of the city gates. Then he came to Rome and, placing on the tomb of St. Peter the keys of Ravenna and of the various other cities of the Exarchate together with the aforementioned donation issued by his king concerning them, he handed them over to be owned and controlled for all time by the apostle of God and by his most holy vicar the pope and all his successors in the papacy..."[39]

In gratitude, Stephen conferred upon Pepin a new title: Patrician of the Romans. *Patricius* was a title of honor bestowed by the emperor, further evidence that the pope was assuming imperial authority.

Indeed, the spurious Donation of Constantine appeared around this time, for Adrian makes reference to it in his communications with Pepin's son, Charlemagne. Part of the document, for a long time accepted as canon law, reads, "We [Emperor Constantine I] -together with all our satraps, and the whole senate and my nobles, and also all the people subject to the government of glorious Rome-considered it advisable, that as the Blessed Peter is seen to have been constituted vicar of the Son of God on the earth, so the Pontiffs who are the representatives of that same chief of the apostles, should obtain from us and our empire the power of a supremacy greater than the clemency of our earthly imperial serenity is seen to have conceded to it, choosing that same chief of the apostles and his vicars to be our constant

intercessors with God. And to the extent of our earthly imperial power, we have decreed that his holy Roman church shall be honoured with veneration, and that more than our empire and earthly throne the most sacred seat of the Blessed Peter shall be gloriously exalted, we giving to it power, and dignity of glory, and vigour, and honour imperial."[40]

Conflict between the papacy and Lombardy broke out again when Desiderius succeeded Aistulf in 756. He refused to honor the Donation of Pepin, prompting Pope Adrian I to call upon Pepin's son and successor, Charlemagne. As might be expected, the rise of Charlemagne was not smooth. Pepin III upon his death had two sons, Charles and Carloman,[41] and they initially split the kingdom, with Charles taking the core of the Frankish kingdom and Carloman taking the lands that had been conquered by Pepin III and Charles Martel. The first issue occurred when an illegitimate son of Pepin named Grifo felt he should be included in the partition of power. The two brothers quickly put down their half-brother, but quickly afterwards they began fighting each other.

Before things escalated too much, Carloman died of natural causes in 771. Carloman did have young children, but, fearing for their safety, Carloman's wife, a Lombard by birth, escaped with her children into Lombardy. This made it relatively simple for Charles to come in and reintegrate this territory into his kingdom. This also created one of a number of possible pretexts for an invasion of Lombardy later in his reign.[42]

Once his own territory was solidified, Charles began to fight wars of conquest and conversion. In total, he fought 54 campaigns over the course of 43 years.[43] For example, he fought a long and bitter campaign against the Germanic Saxons beginning in 772. The Franks had a history of raiding the Saxon lands, but this was a full-scale invasion, with an aim to both conquer land and convert the pagan Saxons to Christianity. This campaign would go on in fits and starts for over 30 years, until 804.

In 773, Charlemagne invaded Lombardy, and by 774 he had conquered the entire kingdom, assuming the title King of the Lombards in addition to King of the Franks.

Even when Charlemagne was unsuccessful, his exploits could become the stuff of legend, as demonstrated by his campaign in the Iberian Peninsula in

778.[44] Charlemagne had shored up his defenses along the Pyrenees Mountains to prevent Muslim incursions and waited for a chance to attack the Muslims, which would come in 778 when the Muslim administration in Iberia was once again thrown into turmoil and chaos by infighting.[45] That year, Abd ar-Rahman I attempted to control the very southern tips of Al-Andalus but was opposed by the main governor of the territory. Although Abd ar-Rahman I managed to expel the governor, he still suffered from numerous rebellions and the resistance of the Abbasids back in Baghdad, who did not support his rule. Thus, when Abd ar-Rahman I attempted to venture further into Spain, the regional lords of territories like Barcelona and Zaragoza decided to ask the Franks for assistance rather than deal with the upstart. In exchange for aid, they offered Charlemagne and the Franks their allegiance.[46]

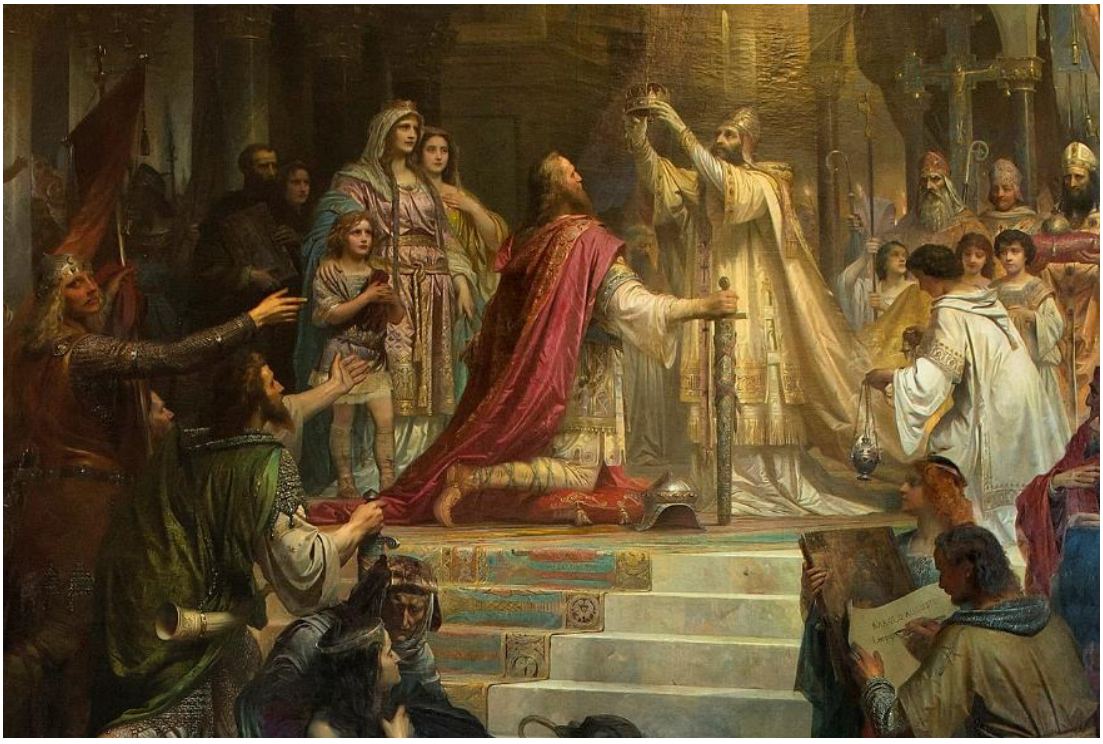
Charlemagne agreed to their terms and ventured across the Pyrenees with his army, but things did not go as planned. Although the governor of Zaragoza agreed to assist Charlemagne, the city rebelled and refused to let the Franks inside. Charlemagne was unable to take the city and decided to leave, only to be ambushed by the Christian Basques and completely routed. Charlemagne's battle against the Basques would be turned into the famous *Song of Roland*, one of the most famous literary works to come out of the Middle Ages in Europe.

A depiction of Charlemagne's campaign in the *Song of Roland*

As Charlemagne continued to rule, he came to understand that, with so many different peoples and cultures within his kingdom, he needed to set up his government less like a homogeneous kingdom and more like an empire that demanded obedience and some standardization, even as it took differences of culture and language into account. He looked at the only great example he knew and began modeling his kingdom after Rome.[47]

By the end of the 8th century, Charlemagne added to the Franks' kingdom "extensive new areas including Frisia, Saxony, Lombard Italy, the Avar empire, and a portion of Muslim Spain."[48] Charlemagne spread Christianity while doing so, and on Christmas Day in the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as the new Emperor of Rome in Saint Peter's Basilica. This is often cited as one of the most consequential moments in all of medieval history, and while the event does spark the collective imagination, what was done on that day was less about a "New Rome" moving forward and more

about an acknowledgment of what Charlemagne had already done up to that point.[49]



***Imperial Coronation of Charlemagne* by Friedrich Kaulbach (1861)**

Before Charlemagne's coronation, there had been no formal break with Constantinople, but recognizing Charlemagne aimed to ensure the Roman Empire was reborn in the West. For the papacy, the new empire secured its independence from Constantinople since the new emperor had received his crown from the Church. The popes maintained and would continue to maintain for centuries that the imperial power lay in their hands as the heirs and custodians of ancient Rome, and that they had delegated that power to the King of the Franks. The papacy would guard this doctrine jealously, and for centuries it held that no man could call himself emperor until the pope had placed the Crown of Charlemagne upon his head. To emphasize the point, the popes devised a ceremony for their own coronation, by which they received a bejeweled tiara with the following words: "Receive the tiara adorned with three crowns, and know that you are the father of princes and kings, the ruler of the world, the vicar of our Saviour Jesus Christ on earth, to whom be all honor and glory, world without end."[50] The last papal

coronation took place in 1963, and by then the revived Holy Roman Empire had been defunct for 157 years.

Naturally, many Holy Roman emperors disputed the pope's interpretation of their authority, and the battles between popes and emperors shaped European history for much of the Middle Ages. Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073-1085) famously declared that the pope had no earthly judge and that he might depose emperors and absolve their subjects from the oaths of allegiance. He demonstrated this power by forcing Emperor Henry IV, in penitential garb, to wait upon him in the snow outside the walls of Canossa, and after three days the pope deigned to absolve him from excommunication.

For a time the popes were masters of Europe, but in the end their power was eroded by the growing tide of nationalism, religious indifference, and the papacy's own corruption. By the time the Papal States were abolished in 1870, the papacy had become a citadel adamantly holding out against the outside world.

While the political division between East and West was spurred by the popes, the religious tensions remained between church officials in Rome and Constantinople. The date traditionally given for the final Great Schism is 1054, when the churches of Rome and Constantinople excommunicated each other, but even then people generally did not recognize that Christianity was divided. In fact, the popes continued to assert their primacy over all Christendom, including those in the East, who were now labeled schismatics.

The popes considered their unchallenged possession of their patrimony in Italy vital to what they viewed as their divine mission to guide, protect, and feed the flock entrusted to them by Jesus Christ through Peter. And yet their commitment to temporal rule involved actions that Gregory the Great would probably not have approved of, given that he had declared "my kingdom is not of this world."[51] For centuries the popes behaved just like any other Italian prince, making war, fomenting rebellion, and engaging in espionage and assassination. Some popes donned armor and led their troops in battle. Pope Julius II (r. 1503-1513) was nicknamed the "Warrior Pope" and personally led his army during the Siege of Mirandola in 1510. Such behavior was considered abhorrent to the Eastern Orthodox Church, which forbade its clerics to bear arms or shed blood.[52] As late as 1870, Pope Pius

IX publicly blessed his 13,000 troops and ordered them to resist the assault on Rome from the new Kingdom of Italy, but he also commanded that as soon as the walls of Rome were breeched, they were to lay down their arms.

Even after the unification of Italy, the popes would not give their blessing to the new secular order. After the fall of Rome, the popes voluntarily imprisoned themselves in the Vatican as a protest against the invasion. Pius and several successors (Leo XIII, Pius X, and Benedict XV) refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Italian state, and the Italian king remained excommunicated until 1878. With his life nearing its end, he humbly begged pardon of Pius IX through his envoys. When Pius died himself the same year, a group of anticlerical Romans attempted to seize his coffin and cast it into the Tiber.

The "Roman Question" was only resolved in 1929 when in negotiations with Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-1939), the Italian government under Benito Mussolini recognized the papacy's sovereignty over the Vatican in return for acknowledging the state of Italy. Thus, the Vatican City State, over which the pope is sovereign, was born.

For many years, the occupants retained the trappings of imperial authority, including a coronation, a court etiquette, ceremonial customs (the popes continued to refer to themselves as "We" in official communications until 1978), and even an army.[53] But in recent times the Holy See has sought to return to the mission that Gregory the Great would have recognized and relished: the service of the poor and disadvantaged. The current pope, Francis, especially eschews the formality and pomp associated with a bygone era and seems to have more in common with Gregory, but to this day, conservative factions within the Catholic Church would like to see the pope return to his status as a universal monarch.

As this indicates, Church officials are still grappling with the ramifications of decisions made nearly 1,500 years ago.

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[1] "When did the Roman Empire really fall?" *Byzantine Emporia* May 10 2019, https://byzantinemporia.com/western-roman-empire-really-fall/.

[2] Kulikowski, 2007:107-109

[3] The Codex had 366 folios, of which 188 were preserved. Today, it is kept in Carolina Rediviva, of Uppsala University Library. A digitalized version is available at http://app.ub.uu.se/arv/codex/faksimiledition/contents.html

[4] Carson and Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia. 4*., 299.

[5] Thomas J. Craughwell (2014*) St. Peter's Bones: How the Relics of the First Pope Were Lost and Found . . . and Then Lost and Found Again,* Crown Publishing Group, p.103.

[6] Acts of the Council of Ephesus sess.3. https://orthodoxchurchfathers.com/fathers/npnf214/npnf2188.htm.

[7] Runciman, *The Eastern Schism*, 5.

[8] Ibid., 6.

[9] Collins, *Keepers of the Keys of Heaven*, 118-119.

[10] Fried, *Donation of Constantine and Constitutum Constantini*, 1.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1066.

[13] A title first claimed by Pope Gelasius I (r. 492 – 496). George E Demacopoulos (2013), *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity,* University of Pennsylvania Press, p.82.

[14] Velleius, *Hist. Rom*. II, 106. Schmidt, 5.

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[16] Gregory of Tours, *Historia francorum* x.i.

[17] Ezekiel 9, 6.

[18] Wace, Henry (1911) "Gordianus", Dictionary *of Christian Biography and Literature*, Delmarva Publications Inc.

[19] "Pope Gregory I", *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913)

[20] Whether the resurrected body of Christ was truly palpable or not, Gregory argued for the affirmative. In fact he was unable to read the works of Eutychius, not knowing Greek. It is strange that he was sent to Greek-speaking Constantinople, though he likely used interpreters. Ekonomou, Andrew J. (2007). *Byzantine Rome and the Greek Popes: Eastern influences on Rome and the papacy from Gregory the Great to Zacharias, A.D. 590–752*. Lexington Books, p.12.

[21] "Pope Gregory I", *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Richards, Jeffrey (1980). *Consul of God*. London: Routelege & Keatland Paul, p.44.

[24] "..it is a well-known fact that those people who must *want* to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it." Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*.

[25] Procopius, *History of the Wars*, II.xxii-xxxiii.

[26] Jacobus de Voragine (c.1260), Ch 46: "Saint Gregory", *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*.

[27] "Pope Gregory I", *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913).

[28] Regulae Pastoralis I, 4.

[29] Ibid., I, 6.

[30] Gregory, Letters 5.36.

[31] Homilies on Ezekiel, as translated by Peter Partner *The Lands of St. Peter: The Papal State in the Middle Ages and ..., Volume 10*

[32] Continuator of Prosper, Mon. Germ. SS. Antiq., IX, 339.

[33] Gregory, Letters 1.30.

[34] *Gregory*, Letters XIII, 38.

[35] "Admonition to Paschasius, bishop of Naples, to ensure that the Jews are not disturbed in the celebration of their religious festivals", *The Apostolic See and the Jews, Documents: 492-1404*;

Simonsohn, Shlomo, p.23.

[36] Gregory, Letters I.34.

[37] https://reconciliationpoetry.com/encouraging-the-heart-in-dark-times-cura-pastoralis-590-a-d/.

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[40] *Donatio Constantini*, I, XCVI, xiv.

[41] One scholar notes, with some amusement, that the life of any Carolingian with the given name of Carloman never seemed to end well. Daileader, 26.

[42] Ibid 26-27.

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[44] Rosenwein, 113.

[45] Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain.*

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[48] Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 3., 165.

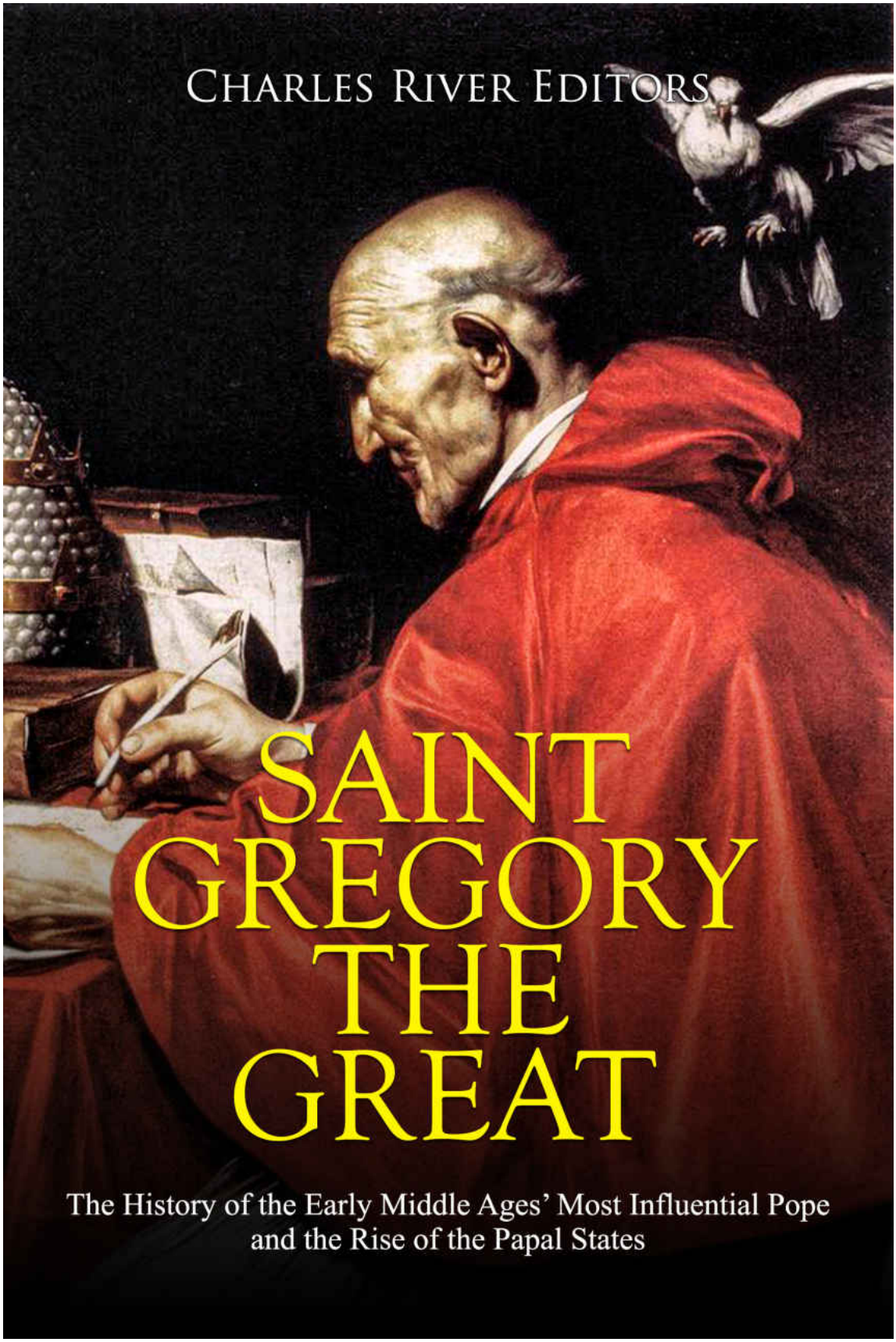
[49] Dorsey Armstrong, *Turning Points in Medieval History, Course Guidebook.* The Great Courses. (Chantilly, VA: Teaching Company, 2012) 25.

[50] Francis Patrick Henrick, *The Primacy of the Apostolic See Vindicated* (Baltimore, London and Pittsburgh 1857), p. 252

[51] John 19: 36.

[52] So too did the Canon Law of the Roman Church. John Howard Yoder; Theodore J. Koontz; Andy Alexis-Baker (1 April 2009). *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*. Brazos Press. pp. 133.

[53] Besides the famous Swiss Guard, there were two other papal corps, the Palatine Guard and the Noble Guard, both of which were disbanded in 1970.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